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Issues in Women's Liberation Struggles in Contemporary Nigeria: A Study of Ezeigbo's *Hands that Crush Stone* (2010)

By Osita C. Ezenwanebe¹

Abstract

This paper evaluates some contentious issues in women's liberation struggles in Nigeria as recreated in Ezeigbo's play, *Hands that Crush Stone*. The particularities of gender are neglected in the anti-colonial struggle for Nigerian independence, and women's issues are subsumed within the nationalist literatures of cultural regeneration. With the influence of feminism, many Nigerian women embark on the identification of women's personhood by controverting the representations of Nigerian women in male-centered works. African theatre, in particular, is very skeptical about the feminist ideology aimed at changing the status of women in society. Similarly, many people are suspicious of women's liberation struggle and its consequent effect on the society. Hence feminism in Nigeria is rent with many contentious issues. Taking Marxist and feminist perspectives in the analysis of *Hands that Crush Stone*, the researcher explores some of the major issues in the character's revolutionary gender-cum-class struggle for a pay rise. The proposition is that *Hands that Crush Stone* embodies most of the concerns in women's struggle for survival in contemporary Nigeria.

Key Words: Nigerian women, Theodora Ezeigbo, Nigerian theatre

Introduction

It is a welcome development that the multiple award winner and literary giant, Theodora Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo extends her creative genius to Nigerian Theatre. Ezeigbo is Professor of English Literature, a foremost feminist scholar and women's rights activist who premiered the teaching of gender studies in the department of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria. In her numerous writings—novels, children's literature, plays, poems, critical essays and short stories, Akachi Ezeigbo has demonstrated an unequivocal commitment to women's issues. In her works, she contends patriarchal attitudes and sex-centric ideologies that dislodge Nigerian women from the centre to the periphery and reconstructs the image of women in her female characters in the hope of freeing them from the bonds of social oppression, making them visible and powerful enough in modern, democratic Nigeria. She is also determined to uncover the unacknowledged strength of African womanhood sidelined in the separatist heat of radical feminist aesthetics. Her creative arts are best described as restoring the dignity of woman. This paper examines some of the issues arising from the character's quest for freedom in one of her plays—*Hands that Crush Stone*.

Hands that Crush Stone is significant in the literatures of gender discourse in Nigeria. It embodies the current trend of gender discourse that advances gender theorizing in Nigeria beyond female reticence and abortive opposition. The Modern African literary scene was

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dominated by men who in their quest to redeem the dignity of African culture denigrated by colonial operation in the continent, fail to foreground gender in their works. The plays are dominated by male characters with the female as the other in the margin. Ladele rightly observes that “the literary legacies of anti-colonialist male writers generally subsume gender issues within their potently masculine national ideology” (464). The few active female characters that Irene Salami sees as “evidence of strong female characters who are able to hold their own and who enter the stage with confidence and enthusiasm” (128) operate only within the confines of traditional institutions and are de-gendered if they venture into public arena as Segi does in Wole Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest* (1967). Mabel Ekwierhoma, a professor of drama and gender theorist, suggests a “woman-centred revisionist approach” to Soyinka’s post-Nobel creativity capable of emancipating female characterisation from the strings of female stereotypy. “There is a good need for Soyinka to further correct the female portraiture in his plays two decades after the Nobel Prize” (146), she said.

In view of the masculinist tendency of modern African and Nigerian drama, Ogundipe-Leslie, a feminist theorist and a social campaigner for women’s rights, asserts unequivocally that:

All theoreticians of African Liberation have failed to confront the issue of gender within the family or to confront the family as a site for social transformation. They will talk about changing society, mobilizing Africa, but not about the issue of the relation of men to women; gender relations. With modernization of Africa, however, in my view, there has to be a new re-ordering of society, particularly at the level of family because of erosions and changes within the indigenous family stemming from new developments which has to be interrogated. (210)

She calls for “Transformational discourses as a new and central discourse in the academy” (Preface xiii) that can prioritise gender relation as a problematic space in drama, a shift away from the cultural conservatism of early modern Nigerian and African drama.

Zulu Sofola (Nigeria) like Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland (Ghana) pioneers a woman-centred writing in Nigerian drama (Emenyi 68), by creating strong, central female characters who break women’s culture of silence and contend male domination in patriarchal African culture. In *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), for example, Ugwoma, the strong female protagonist, attempts to transgress the sanctity of widowhood rites and wife inheritance, asserting her right to personal choice and self-fulfillment by getting pregnant for her outwitted, soul lover, Uloko, during the period she is mourning the death of her imposed husband, Adigwu. Despite the fact that Ugwoma’s act is considered a taboo among her people, because tradition expects her to sit for three months beside the ashes in the fire place and undergo ritual cleansing before ever having sexual relation with another man, she defiantly argues her quest for self-actualisation and personal freedom. Unfortunately, she fails to pull through as she dies with her lover in the struggle. Ugwoma, like Anowa in Aidoo’s *Anowa*, is represented as a rebel and her self-will and personal choice as a threat to African communal life. Osita Ezenwanebe criticises Sofola’s disregard for Ugwoma’s point of view in the play. She sees it as a deliberate attempt aimed at supporting the playwright’s belief in the indomitability of African culture (“The Representation of Women” 66). Imoh A. Emenyi seems to corroborate this view when he writes that “Sofola locates female assertion within tradition because it is the basis of group experience” (75).

Zulu Sofola, the matriarch of modern Nigerian drama (Obafemi 155), offers a traditional model for women's liberation in Nigeria. Her gender theory, like that of Aidoo, is conservative and un-ideological. She never hides her reservation for Western radical feminism as a liberating model for African women. Hence, though she creates powerful female characters who interrogate oppressive norms, she situates their freedom within and not outside a cultural framework. She frustrates an individualistic approach to women's struggle, implying the need for collaboration. Sofola believes that Western civilization has the tendency to "de-womanise" African women. According to her, "De-womanisation" refers to modern African women who have lost hold of the liberating models in African culture (qtd. in Emenyi 73). She is convinced that there abounds in traditional culture liberating paradigms capable of assuaging women's quest for freedom and self-actualisation. Hudson-Weems records Aidoo's description of feminism as "that embarrassing Western philosophy. The destroyer of home; imported from America to ruin nice African women" (44).

The next generation of Nigerian gender theorists and critics reject Sofola's traditional aesthetics in favour of Western, radical feminism. Tess Onwueme and Stella Dia'Oyedapo for example, employ the radicalism of core Western (radical) feminism in addressing women's issues in their plays. They reject the sanctity or indomitability implied in the traditional aesthetics of early post-independent dramatists because of its failure to change the status of women in Nigeria. Nigerian radical feminists are convinced that the emancipation of modern Nigerian women should transcend mere abortive, assertive quest that affects nothing but a reaffirmation of gender inequality. They declare a gender war which privileges women's freedom over oppressive culture and men's welfare. Strong, female protagonists seek emancipation outside the confines of traditional culture, dismantling both man and oppressive cultural traditions on their way to freedom. It is bell hooks who defines feminism as the woman's "freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex determined role, freedom from society's oppression and restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action" (24).

In *The Broken Calabash* (2009) Tess Onwueme recreates a radical feminist in Ona, an *Idegbe* (a woman and an only child), whose desire to marry her choice and lover, Diaku, against the traditional customs of *Idegbe* and *osu* (outcast) sparks off a fierce gender war between Ona and her father, Courtuma, a symbol of the oppressive traditions. As an *Idegbe*, tradition forbids Ona to be married but to stay in her father's house and populate it for the continuity of the patriarchal lineage. Ona insists on her right to personal choice and resists what she sees as an outdated, oppressive tradition. "Anything that cannot stand the force of change", she says, "must be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new dawn" (TBC 122). Although Ona's desire is thwarted in the end, she forces her father, Courtuma, down the drain with all the oppressive tradition he denotes by implicating him in incest, the grief of which kills him. In *The Broken Calabash*, the indomitable spirit of Sofola's tradition in Courtuma meets the defiant spirit of a radical feminist in Ona, and though Ona's wish is dashed, she succeeds in uprooting possible obstacles to women's freedom. Ona's liberating strategy is criticised in Nigerian drama as counterproductive, anti-communitarian and a threat to African life. In the words of Dennis Akoh the execution of the feminist vision in the African plays "exposes the chimera and hypothetical nature of feminism within a culture that places high premium on the family system and its values" (59). Regard for family life is identified as one of the main issues in women's liberation struggles in Ezeigbo's *Hands that Crush Stone* (2010).

The current gender theory in Nigeria seeks to harmonise the gains of traditional aesthetics with those of radical feminism by eliminating the ineffectual assertion of Sofola's female protagonists and the violence-ridden, counter productivity of Onwueme's radical feminists. Contemporary gender theory in Nigeria contextualizes feminism, seeking to preserve the basic fabrics of African life. It emphasises women's empowerment, non-violent activism and strong individualistic and collective contestation, and hence, foregrounds strong female characters that not only dare but transcend gender oppression. Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Obioma Nwanneka, Chioma Opara, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, Mary Kolawole, Julie Okoh, Catherine Acholonu, Ogundipe-Leslie, Osita Ezenwanebe, and Tracy Ezeajughi-Utoh, to mention but a few, articulate and analyse liberating ideologies for gender discourse capable of ensuring a sustainable, context friendly strategy for women's emancipation not only in Nigeria but also in Africa, and this forms the theoretical framework for the study.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The analysis of the material, *Hands that Crush Stone*, is based on certain concepts from the Marxist and feminist perspectives on class and gender inequality and the consequent struggle for liberation. The reality of modern life is the inequality and oppression arising from perceived inequality and oppression in social relationship in terms of socio-economic status, class, sex, race or colour. Karl Marx and Frederick Engel conceive of human relationships in the workplace as exploitative, resulting in class opposition and struggle for liberation. Karl Marx argues that "The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general...It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (41). For Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the relation is marked by the oppression of one class, the working class, by another, the bourgeoisie or capitalist class. They assert that in workplaces, the oppressive capitalists who own the means of production and the proceeds put in little energy while the working class who has only their labour to put in has only meager salaries or wages. It is believed that to change their status in society, the workers engage the oppressors in a political revolution aimed at overthrowing capitalism and enthroning communism. The Marxists believe it is impossible to understand art without a good analysis of the social system from where it emerges. The Marxist concept of class oppression and struggle is applied to the analysis of the social context of the women's struggle in *Hands that Crush Stone*. The women stone crushers in the play under study are poor, working-class widows who engage their oppressive capitalist, Chief Mbu, in a struggle for survival.

Layli Phillips defines feminism as the "critical perspective and social movement that revolves around the eradication of sexism, the dismantling of patriarchy and the elimination of violence against women" (Intro. xxxiv-xxxv). Feminist criticism is concerned with the issues of women's oppression and liberation. Feminist interpretation of art demands that the critic asks certain pertinent questions about women in the work and these, Belsey and Moore say, include "how the texts represent women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual differences" (1). Like Marxists' identification with the workers in struggle, a feminist critical approach invites the critic to see the issues from the side of women. "To interpret a work" is always to address, whether implicitly or explicitly, certain kinds of issues about what it says (Belsey and Moore 1).

It is specifically Akachi Ezeigbo's feminist model, "Snail-Sense Feminism", that is employed in the analysis of the strategy of the women's collective struggle and the women's liberation issues in the play *Hands that Crush Stone*. According to her, Snail-Sense Feminism is the product of her research into "the condition of Nigerian women, their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impacting on their lives in the past and in contemporary times" (25). The theory proposes Nigerian women's application of certain qualities of the snail to issues and obstacles facing them. The snail is wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged and is able to successfully climb over boulders and dangerous objects while carrying its house (the shell) on its back. The snail's ability of negotiation, tact, and conciliatory attitude are proposed as useful survival strategies which Nigerian women must learn in order to surmount the enormous obstacles on the way to a good life in the harsh patriarchal Nigerian society. Ezeigbo's liberating model is indigenous. It agrees with Zulu Sofola who opines that there are enough paradigms within Nigerian and African culture capable of emancipating Nigerian women. Ezeigbo is convinced of its viability:

The Strategy was applied by our foremothers in their interactions with people in their communities. Therefore, if women of the past adopted the strategy of the snail to survive, today's Nigerian women should do no less as she negotiates and renegotiates her way in her dealings with the men and the society at large. (31)

Snail-Sense Feminism, like other models indigenous to Nigeria, underscores the primacy of accommodating and cooperating with men for all-inclusive social reformation. From Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's "Stiwanism" (1994), Catherine Acholonu's "Motherism" (1995), Chioma Opara's "Femalism" (2004) to Obioma Nwanneka's "Nego-Feminism" (2004), Nigerian gender theorists seek to Nigerianise feminist struggle by devising strategies for gender complementarity that support African communal life. Snail-Sense Feminism, like the other liberating paradigms, privileges womanist strategies to radical feminist opposition. Chikwenye Ogunyemi, sees womanism as "a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom". Layli Phillips asserts that womanism is not feminism (xx) and defines it as "an ethnically and culturally situated perspective that does not seek to negate difference through transcending it. Rather womanism seeks to harmonise and coordinate difference so that difference does not become irreconcilable and dissolve into violent destruction" (xxii). The Marxist and feminist perspectives are adequate in uncovering the forces that necessitate the women's struggle for pay rise as well as the issues raised by the struggle.

Hands that Crush Stone, a Stage Play

The characters in *Hands that Crush Stone* are two dimensional, along gender lines—the oppressed women (the working-class women and widows) and the male capitalists and oppressors (Chief Mbu, his henchman and the police officers). Though the women are workers, their oppression is not merely economic or class based. A lot of patriarchal attitudes of Mr. Mbu, for example, his use of physical violence on the women and his complete disregard of the women's agitation are gendered. This paper examines two intertwined forces of class and gendered forces which the women contend with in their quest for freedom. *Hands that Crush Stone*, Ezeigbo's first stage play, premiered at the Arts Theatre, University of Lagos, Nigeria, on August 21, 2008. It dramatises the struggle of eight poor, ignorant and helpless women to free

themselves from the oppressive grip of their boss: a mindless, greedy politician. Five widows, Uto, Kemi, Arit, Amina and Ruki, and three other poor, helpless women, Timi, Ogo and Ama, whose husband is bedridden, work as stone crushers in Chief Mbu's quarry. Chief Mbu is the incumbent chairman of Izunga Local Government who aspires to be re-elected for a second term in office. The women embark on a two-week protest against what they consider an unjust remuneration for their hard work in the quarry: "we come here in the morning before eight, crush stones till five in the evening only to go home with the starvation wage he pays us" (2), complains Amina. The women are paid three thousand Naira a month, about a hundred Naira less than one dollar each day. Unable to bear the meager pay any longer, the stone crushers stage a sit-in revolution: they occupy the quarry and refuse to work, demanding a pay increase of one thousand five hundred per month.

In the first encounter between the women stone crushers and their employer, Chief Mbu, the women make a passionate appeal for him to consider the nature of the work they do and yield to their demand. Uto explains: "crushing stone is 'igedu' work, slave work, and it has broken our backs" (29), but Chief Mbu is adamant and insists that they either resume work on the old pay or vacate his quarry; "I have said it before and I say it again: I am not adding a kobo to what I pay you" (28). The battle line is drawn: the women resolve neither to vacate nor work. They sit around, telling stories. In the stillness of the stasis erupts violence: Chief Mbu uses both physical violence and police brutality to dislodge the 'rebels', to intimidate and subdue them into accepting the old, poor wage, but the women stand their ground, insisting on a pay rise. Chief Mbu storms out threatening to arrest and detain the women. But before he can carry out his threat, the media move in to cover the women's strike action only for Chief Mbu to reappear. Immediately he learns that his political opponent Madam Udentia is in support of the women's strike, and he vows to 'out smart' her. He upturns the event to his own selfish end. He pays the women the new wage, and lauds his manifesto on the dignity and relevance of women and how his government intends to further uplift them if voted a second time, all amidst elaborate media coverage. The important fact is that the women win the struggle at the end of the day; they come out victorious from the battle against oppression and exploitation. "The commodity which a husband refused his wife is abundantly on sale in the market. I told you we will win!"(43) Uto, the leader of the women stone crushers, says triumphantly. The women's confrontation with their employer, Chief Mbu, brings to fore some pertinent issues relating to women and their status in Nigerian society. This paper explores the issues as challenges to women's freedom in contemporary Nigeria.

The Main Issues in the Women's Liberation Struggle

The women in *Hands that Crush Stone* are subjected to social and economic exploitation. The first issue in the women's fight for freedom is that of wifhood and women's domestic labour. *Hands that Grind Stone* is a recreation of women as wives. All the stone crushers are wives. Five of them are widows. The women are at the lowest level of socio-economic status as they struggle to make a living wage. Wifhood is still cherished in Nigeria and among the Igbo in particular. According to a popular Igbo adage, "When a woman outgrows 'whose daughter is this?', she answers 'whose wife is this?'. "Africa, in her concept of existence as cyclical and living as communal maintains strong social ties which are rooted in family life. Nigeria, a country in West Africa, upholds the sanctity of an extended, functional family established through heterosexual marriage and child bearing. In Nigerian society, the family is patriarchal.

Gender relations between husband and wife are unequal. Women as wives lose their personal identity and assume the names associated with their social roles as wives and mothers; for example, “Nwunye John”, that is, “John’s wife” or “Mama Ada”, that is, “Ada’s mother”, and that opens the door to further powerlessness and oppression. Uto and the other women stone crushers in the play under study are in conventional family but the playwright controverts the depersonalization of women as wives by assigning personal names to the women characters.

Ezeigbo laments the number of contemporary Nigerian women who mandatorily and cheerfully lose their names upon marriage (*Gender Issues in Nigeria* 21). Marriage in Nigeria is seen as one of the hallmarks of a complete woman. While this attitude may be considered as indicative of strong family ties, it nonetheless betrays the state of women as wives and the level of power at their disposal. Wives in Nigerian society are expected to occupy the private, family life and engage in domestic labour. They have limited access to power while the public sphere of men affords them limitless exercise of power. Tragedies like their husbands’ deaths or sickness force the women stone crushers into the labour market without relevant knowledge or skill but with only their natural strength which they engage in a stone quarry. Five of the women are widows while three are not, but their husbands are dead financially and one is bedridden. Not only does domestic labour fail to attract financial reward but it also does not attract as much dignity as men’s paid public labour. Chief Mbu in *Hands that Crush Stone* warns the striking women: “If you do not want to work, then what are you doing at my quarry? Is this a kitchen where you gather to gossip and while away your time?” (27). He describes the kitchen, a symbol of private domain popularly called “a woman’s place”, as a place of unproductive labour, where layabouts waste their life and time away. Chief Mbu’s argument echoes that of many Nigerian men who see nothing creative and dignifying in household jobs. Radical feminists identify the conventional family as the seat of women’s oppression and argue that it must be dealt with before any reasonable progress is made at women’s liberation. Mobolanle Sotunsa argues that women’s domestic work counts as productive labour (10). Sadly though, many Nigerian men like Chief Mbu in *Hands that Crush Stone*, are yet to accept the argument.

The issue of women and poverty is closely related to that of wifhood and domestic labour. The women in *The Hands that Crush Stone* are poor not because they lack the physical and intellectual capacities but because of the circumstances that push them into the lowest part of socioeconomic ladder. The only place where their labour is engaged is in a quarry. The stone quarry is a similar to domestic work—back-breaking, energy sapping and yet neither financially rewarding nor appreciated. The women in their poverty are deprived of the tools for greatness in modern life. The result is ignorance and a feeling of helplessness. The women are in triple oppression: as wives, workers and widows. As wives, Chief Mbu, their employer, sees their issue as “womanly”, secondary and of no consequence. They lack the power of financial negotiation in modern world. For example, Chief Mbu knows they are not unionized. As workers, they suffer the same class oppression as the proletariats of Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels—those who do the greatest work but receive only starvation wages enough to supply them energy for the next day’s work. They are even worse than Marx’s proletariat because they are casual wage earners. Chief Mbu tells the press: “These women are not workers, they are not regular workers. They are casual workers we engage to crush stones when we need them. Is it because of them you are here?” (39). In order words, they do not deserve the honour of media coverage because they are less than workers as they are considered less than man. The women as widows are products of cultural degradation. The five widows in the play under study have gone through much cultural degradation associated with the widowhood rites. Some widows are required to sit in the ashes

confined in the house for months like Ugboma in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, shave their hair, howl for three days, etc. to prove their innocence of their husband's death. For instance, Eaglewoman in Ezeigbo's novel, *Children of the Eagle* (2002) has to howl for three days to display public grief for the loss of her husband, Josiah. In the same novel, her daughters stage a protest against the patriarchal myths that inform widowhood rites. In his essay "Daughteronomy", Nwachukwu Agbada, commending the revolutionary action of Eaglewoman's daughters as a form of re-education, affirms that:

An assumption of patriarchy in Igbo land is that a man never dies without the wife or wives knowing something about it. There is no written law about this, yet if his death is to be investigated, the wife or wives are the first suspects...in Igbo tradition, it is assumed that once the man dies, it is the widow who would have arranged for it in order to benefit from the wealth he would have left behind. (94)

The widows in *Hands that Crush Stone*, crushed by triple oppression—as wives, workers and widows, wallow in penury with a deep sense of hopelessness. The work they do for a living and the conditions of service testify to their hopeless state. "You will not be able to find people who will accept such wages", Uto says to Chief Mbu, the employer, "it is because we are widows and hopeless that we accepted this amount for so long" (28). The women have an intense female consciousness, and feminists mark out femininity as a site for transgression and reformation; a site for gender struggle. Feminisms all over the world and irrespective of peculiarities of social context champion women's contestation of gender bias and oppression with strategies relevant to their environment. In theorising about the nature of women's issues, the polarization between western feminisms and African feminisms is therefore more in modus operandi. Certainly there are commonalities like the firm belief in the universal, obnoxious oppression of women and the inevitability of women's freedom. In the current era of global feminist thought, a central objective is to outline and search for these, to build coalitions, rather than to underscore polarizations.

Many playwrights have recreated the anonymity that is the state of widows in Nigeria. Ahmed Yerima, a onetime Director of National Theatre, Nigeria explores the social and sexual exploitation of widows. In the play *Aetu*, a young teenage girl, Aetu, suffers sexual violence and is inherited as a wife by three brothers after each one's death. The fate of Aetu reminds one of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* where the heroine, Ihuoma, remarries seven times and at each marriage her husband dies. The cultural belief recreated is that she is such a strange woman, a husband killer, that any man who marries her would die before she could even have a child. In Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the protagonist, Lejoka-Brown, inherits his first wife, Mama Rashida, from his late brother. Women as widows are recreated in the plays as an expendable commodity. If women as wives are twice oppressed, then women as widows are thrice oppressed because they are women, were wives and then widows. I therefore argue that wifedom is the greatest burden of womanhood in Nigeria and the most volatile gender space in dire need of social transformation. When women as wives lose their names and acquired names symbolizing their roles as wife and mother, they lose the right to self-definition (Ezeigbo 21-22). Yet for most Nigerian women, wifedom, like motherhood, is a burden worth carrying for common social good. In fact, as Ezeigbo rightly writes in *Gender Issues in Nigeria* "A woman who goes through life without experiencing both wifedom and motherhood is regarded as unnatural or unfortunate" (xv), and the situation has not changed much today. *Hands that Crush*

Stone raises core gender issues, which Nigerian women must confront. The inhumane treatment of women as widows is a commonality that women face around the world—and hence unites women across differences.

Another crucial gender issue arising from the women's liberation struggles in *Hands that Crush Stone* is motherhood. All the women in the play under study are not just women, workers and wives but also mothers. They have children and are bread winners despite their poverty and hopelessness. The need to take care of their children threatens their struggle even at the early stage. "I am worried. How long can we hold out against this hardhearted man? Our children are hungry and need to stay in school" (1), Arit says. The women bear the burden of family throughout their struggle in the play. It is the first obstacle that must be surmounted, one that determines the continuation of their struggle. This is because they have strong family ties. They struggle for their family welfare, not just for their own good. For many Africans and Nigerians in particular, the family is sacred and one of the most important social units. The seed of human warmth, nurture and care sown in the family permeates every aspect of social relationships with personal touch unlike the laws and principles that are the basis of Western social relationships. Communal ties are cords of love and personal touch that bind people together. The cord is knotted at pregnancy between the mother and the fetus, and it is symbolized in the umbilical cord which though severed at birth, continues in parental nurture and care.

To remain in the struggle, the women have to devise a means of ensuring the welfare of their families. An Igbo adage has it that "a foul with chicks does not fly high". The women embark on sisterhood-in-struggle to settle the issue of family care. They pull their resources together to provide for their children. They collaborate with Madam Udentia, a political aspirant for the local government chairmanship and a rival to their boss, Chief Mbu. However, Madam Udentia's gift of food stuff is more for the furtherance of her political ambition than for sisterhood. The women cook in turn to feed the children and sustain themselves as they sit tight in the quarry, agitating for a pay rise. "It is comforting to know that our children will have one good meal today and we, too, can look forward to something's to eat" (14), says Uto. They are then able to hold their ground and fight their way to victory without endangering their lives and those of their children and without jettisoning the family life and other social responsibility. Women's ability to manage the private and public life successfully is what Ezeigbo refers to as "women impossible existence" (*Gender Issues* 5-7) while Ezenwanebe calls it "the power of femininity" ("The Emergence" 144) and "the eagle of womanhood" (104).

Women's collective struggle represented in *Hands that Crush Stone* is a common feature in the Nigerian drama of women's liberation. In J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*, the women characters embark on a domestic strike to drive home their point in a collective struggle against marginalization. In their domestic strike, they collectively walk out on their husbands and immigrate to an enemy country. In Uto-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, Nneora, the protagonist and wife of Osita Nonso, however, stages a personal walkout in her protest against male oppression. She goes in search of education, to acquire the knowledge and skills that can empower her to face the burdens of family life as wife and mother. The marriage institution remains a contentious issue in the reconstruction of African women's identity. There are polarizations in the literary constructions of motherhood in literatures. While early radical feminists portray a derogatory concept of motherhood and present marriage and traditional family institution as a women-enslaving institution that is beyond redemption and hence good enough for demolition, liberal feminists, like most African womanists, believe strongly in the sanctity of marriage and family life. African feminists writing from within the continent see

marriage and family life as a source of support for women's liberation in Africa but insist that the social institutions of marriage and family must be reformed to allow for gender complementarity. This is a struggle to unite collective/communitarian values with human rights/women.

Another important issue raised in the women's liberation struggle is the role of the media in women's collective struggle. The arrival of the media—Orion Television and the Press marks a turning point in the women's struggle. They have heard about the women's strike and have come to cover and publicise it so that the world may know what the women are going through. In writing the play *Hands that Crush Stone*, the playwright acts as the press for the women stone crushers at Enugu from where she gets the inspiration for the play. "This play", she says in the Author's Note, "is based on the experience of women stone crushers who work in quarries located in Ebony state of Nigeria. A feature article I read in one of the newspapers in Nigeria gave me the idea to write the play".

The women are jittery at first in releasing information to press because Uto, the women's leader, is aware of the political terrain in which they operate. "Who are you and who sent you here? We do not want trouble. Please go away" (37), she tells the press who assure her of their aim: "We represent some newspapers. We are your friends and want people in this country to read about your strike and know the problem you have" (37). The above statement reminds one of a popular slogan in Nigeria, "Police is your friend", and the media by its avowed function, is equally considered a friend of the masses. Yet despite the assurance by the media personnel, Uto is careful in releasing information to ensure their struggle is not exploited for a political maneuver against Chief Mbu's political ambition. The ultimate aim for their struggle is pay rise and not political witch-hunting. She resists their attempt to link the strike action to Madam Udentia, Chief Mbu's political opponent, who supports the striking workers with food stuff.

Chief Mbu is surprised at the involvement of the media in the women's struggle. He never believes the women's issue is worthy of media attention: "workers?" he asks in dismay. "Is it because of them you are here? With all these recorders and a video camera?" (39). His face-saving statement: "There is no problem here. Just a little matter to iron out with these women and I am here to address the issue" (40) marks the beginning of his political game in which he uses the media to laud his empty political manifesto. He strikes an instant friendly alliance with the women and gives in to their demand. He advises the women:

Do not pay any attention to these troublesome press people. Their report will do you no good. I have come to pay what is due and that is four thousand naira. Is that not what you asked for? An increase of fifty naira a day...well, come forward and receive your money for last month. You will be paid this new salary from today. (40-41)

He goes beyond mere words and pays each of the workers in the presence of the press to convince them that "there is no problem here". He displays his 'paternal care' in front of the media camera to ensure it captures the details of his flamboyant gesture as he is convinced it would take the front page of the national dailies. As a master of the political game, he knows it is expedient that the press leave with positive report about him, and hence uses their gadgets as a tool for his electioneering campaign. His political gimmick is backed up by an empty deceptive rhetoric about his interest in the advancement of womanhood. As he poses to the camera man in different flamboyant postures, he said:

Women are important to us in Izunga Local Government and their welfare is paramount in our plan...we have made their interest a cardinal issues in our administration and if voted in again as chairman of the local government in the forthcoming election, I will continue with the good work and ensure that our women get what they deserve as mothers, wives and citizens of this great country and this number one local government. (41)

Chief Mbu's political propaganda is empty, deceptive, devoid of meaning and therefore absurd. The real meaning of his speech is the opposite of what he says but the press recorded the lies for publication. The Sergeant's question "Oga, we no go arrest de women again?" threatens to reveal the deceit lurking beneath the external political show. The fact is that Chief Mbu is at the quarry with his henchman, Single Bone, and policemen to arrest the striking workers, but events threaten to uncover his inhumanity on the pages of the media if not for his mastery of the political game. The press covers his empty show; his supporters applaud him while the women rejoice in their victory.

Nigerian theatre is like the press, creating awareness of social issues and raising people's consciousness for social reformation and development. In his study, "The Role of Art in Reducing Poverty", Jean-Pierre Daogo Guingane, a Burkina Faso Professor of Drama and Cultural Studies, writes about his interventionist drama for development and opines that "poverty in Africa is linked much more to the mental aptitudes of men and women than to the lack of wealth" (9). He sees some correlation between ignorance and poverty. According to Guingane, "all the wrongs that we are battling against are directly linked to ignorance, and ignorance leads to poverty" (11), and drama can succeed where the press fails because it communicates in a multi-variant way and hence can maneuver the dominating influence of the powerful few who control public opinion.

The case of violence and intimidation is significant in *Hands the Crush Stone*. Chief Mbu is portrayed as a mindless capitalist; vicious and violent. He so much overworks and underpays the helpless women who quarry stone for him that they are forced to go on strike. Since the women are breadwinners of their families, it means the pay is all they and their family live on. He is insensitive to the women's plight and refuses to add to their pay. "So, I am now to blame for your wretched life?" (30), he asks Uto, forgetting that the women spend all day quarrying stone and have no other means of livelihood. Ifi Amadiume's claim that "the sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect" has no place in Chief Mbu's treatment of the women in the play. Modern society has swept away most of the dignities enjoyed by women in pre-colonial Africa, leaving modern gender relation in a state of crisis. Chief Mbu resorts to physical violence by bringing in his body guard, Single Bone, and the policemen to accomplish it for him. Single Bone, a political thug and a tout, knows nothing but brute force. His job is to crush the women the way they crush stone, to intimidate and subdue them into accepting the old terms of service. He wastes no time in doing just that as he "crashes his fists into Kemi's face and she falls down" (31), a violent assault which Chief Mbu considers an undue attention to the women. Realizing that Single Bone's violence fails to make the women cower, he resorts to police brutality. The policemen throw tear gas at the women while "Chief Mbu, Single Bone and the other policeman move to a safe distance. The women scream, rubbing their eyes and coughing" (32). Many writers have rightly argued that women's powerlessness makes them vulnerable to all other sorts of violation and aggression. The women in *Hands that Crush*

Stone are so powerless that they cannot afford to fund an association to fight for their rights. Justice is denied them, and their rights are trampled upon. They dare not fight individually since even as a group they have nothing to fight with but their dogged will.

Conclusion: the Implication of the Women's Liberation Struggle

Feminisms all over the world and irrespective of peculiarities of social context champion women's contestation of gender bias and oppression with strategies relevant to their environment. In theorising about the nature of women's issues, the seeming polarization between western feminisms and African feminisms is therefore more in *modus operandi*. The various labels embody peculiar cultures. "What's in a name?" asks Patricia Hill Collins, who laments that several crucial collective issues are left out or remain obscure while some women engage in a battle of terms and labels (57-58). Certainly there are commonalities of women's issues across the globe. Most of the issues in the women's liberation struggle discussed in this paper are within the global feminist agenda. Issues like women's economic status, political rights for women, basic human rights violations against women, marital and family issues, women's health and survival issues among others are global feminist concerns.

The state of women in *Hands that Crush Stone* embodies that of the most oppressed groups in human history: blacks, workers, and women, and in specific terms, women as wives, mothers and widows. These correspond to different forms of oppression: racial, class and gender. The play is therefore a tale of the crushed humanity of those who crush stone for a living. Unlike some empowered female protagonists who stand up against oppression in some Nigerian plays that prioritise women's issues, the women in *Hands that Crush Stone* lack any form of empowerment. For example, Alaere, the women's leader in Ayakoroma's *Dance on his Grave* is a queen; Ai Sosa in Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* is a medical doctor; so also is Liza, Lejoka-Brown's wife in *Our Husbands Has Gone Mad Again*, to mention but a few. On the contrary, the women in the play under study as well as their leader are completely outside the domains of female power in both traditional and modern sense. Traditionally, they are not leaders of market women, or traditional healers; neither are they priestesses, queen mothers or 'acada' (learned) women. Yet they stand up against oppression and are able to crush exploitation and win victory over their case with Chief Mbu. Why does the playwright, Theadora Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo represent helpless widows as agents of revolutionary change?

The women's revolution implies the possibility of every woman's right to rebellion, irrespective of social status, and Ezeigbo in *Hands that Crush Stone* demonstrates her concept of non-violent activism of Snail-Sense Feminism as a viable strategy to women's liberation. Every woman can say no to subjugation and exploitation. There is a time in every woman's life when she has to face the intimidating circumstances of her life and wrestle with them in the spirit of social justice. It is a point of realization, which heralds a reversal through recognition that portends an end. Uto makes this point of self-awareness clear to Chief Mbu. "A toad can blame no one but himself for not growing a tail. For long we bore this suffering. Our apathy was responsible for our poverty. We accepted slavery and you treated us like the worst of slaves" (30), she says. Akachi Ezeigbo has always concentrated more on the different tactics open to women to negotiate and surmount domination and enslavement than with the elaboration of oppression. *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle* explore the inner and outer resources available to women to transcend gender imbalance and define their personhood. She believes that women are imbued with greater potentials with which to transform

the imbalance and bias and hence transform the society. Women can harness their natural qualities and traditional roles to negotiate and maneuver through obstacles to freedom just as the snail negotiates sharp and dangerous objects on its way.

Another implication of the women's struggle in the play is a negation of the assumption popular in radical feminist literature that women as wives in conventional families are doomed to slavery. For example, in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* Amaka is frustrated trying to play what she sees as the game of ideal wife. She decides to put an end to the game of wifedom and its consequent desire for motherhood since, according to her, they are limiting her self-actualization. "As a wife", she says, "I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul...I don't want to go back to my "wifely" days. No, I am through with husbands. (127). Contrary to Amaka's disposition to marriage, Ezeigbo's women in *Hands that Crush Stone*, as the female protagonists in *House of Symbols* and others, find fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers and fight to protect it. They are able not only to advance in body and soul but also to impact others with the grandeur of their womanhood and hence transform men, women, children, youth and the community. The importance of unity and bonding is highlighted in the play. The women could not have achieved victory individually, but unity, they say, is strength, and this can be seen when the women "cower behind Uto, but refuse to leave" (32).

It is really true that writers write themselves on the pages of their work. Ezeigbo achieves her full potential within the traditional matrix as wife and mother. For her, conventional marriage, which is still cherished in Nigeria and Africa, provides an avenue for man and wife to support each other to succeed. For Adimora-Ezeigbo and other womanist playwrights like Osita Ezenwanebe, the task of the African artists is not to dismantle the traditional institution of marriage but to transform it. Commenting on Adimora-Ezeigbo's works, Osofisan writes that "despite her being vociferous in insisting on the empowerment of women and in her condemnation of their marginalization in a male dominated society, she is not for all that an iconoclast or phalophobist. She protests and denounces, but her goal is negotiation, compromise, reconciliation" (39). By prioritising women, Adimora-Ezeigbo has feminised and domesticated the "anti-colonial" novels..." (Newell 91). There is a need to ignite Nigerian theatre with more dramas on gender issues in order to make it as committed to gender balancing and reconstruction as the novel. Arayela rightly asserts that "dramatic literature can affect the reconstruction and re-invention of roles that African women play in society" (63), and that is what Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo has done in her play, *Hands that Crush Stone*.

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