

BEYOND THE SLAMMED DOOR

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Introduction

For over a century, *A Doll's House* (1879) has effortlessly chronicled and defined the woman. Even though Henrik Ibsen has denied writing for the cause of women and gender equality, his thoughts in this play state otherwise. As the play journeys all over the world and interacts with many cultures, it is the “women’s issue” that forms the heart of study, interpretation and performance of the play. Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in response to issues of gender inequality and the domestication of women by the institution of marriage. Also, he outlines the power hierarchy within Norwegian society and the status accorded to women in and out of the public sphere.

The home as represented by Ibsen in this play, serves as the nucleus of society’s political hierarchy. It is within this space that we, the audience, experience and share Nora’s illusion of happiness and then her sudden realization of powerlessness and an uncertain future. She also faces undefined position in the political structure of her household. Here, Ibsen employs the home to forecast on the structure of culture and society. Centuries later, this play is significant to the development of discourses on women issues and society as a whole. It has travelled to many cultures and undergone various modifications to adapt to the cultures in which it is performed.

A Dolls House is acclaimed for female emancipation and human rights advocacy. It is for the reason that it is popular amongst dramatists interested in female centered narratives. In Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins’ study of the play, detailed in the book *Women Intercultural Performances* (2000), they are of the view that the political context in which the text is performed has an effect on its interpretation (Holledge and Tompkins, 2000, 24). They then asked whether the play still carries a discourse of European emancipatory feminism (*ibid*). This brand of feminism promotes equal representation of the sexes and maintains that women are equal to men.

In this article, I look at the performance of *A Doll's House* in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana and the Nigerian published adaptation titled *Nneora: an African doll's house* (2005). I seek to establish the new relationships that the play is forming in Ghana and Nigeria and also the discourses they have generated in African feminism.

Transposing Nora: the West African Perspective

Early female writers in Africa carried the onus of telling of and defining the African woman and motherhood. Their efforts sought to rewrite Western feminist definitions and perceptions of the sub-Saharan African woman. Apart from her plays and novels, Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-) a significant voice in African feminism, wrote two important essays titled “To Be a Woman” (1982) and “The African Woman Today” (1992) which over the past few decades have exuded identity for the African woman particularly the writer. Likewise is Buchi Emecheta’s stance on the Western representation of women. These two female writers write to question the West

African woman's identity and how she is perceived across the world. Apart from essays and her insistence to be recognized in the feminist world as an African feminist or a feminist with a small 'f', Emecheta has also written the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), which questions the changing landscape of West African gender relations and the institution of motherhood. Set in the 1950s Lagos the novel comments on the changing roles of women in urban Nigeria, polygamy and patriarchy. She seeks to answer her fellow Nigerian novelist Flora Nwapa, who in *Efuru* (1966) tells of her protagonist's urgency to have children.

Aidoo, in most of her works explores issues of marriage, motherhood/childlessness and identities. In *Changes* (1993) she studies monogamous and polygamous marriages and their benefits. In this novel, her protagonist leaves a monogamous marriage and settles for a polygamous one for its flexibility and independence (see also Toman 2012). What is fascinating about *Changes* is that Aidoo creates a character that is well educated; she has a good job and is, for the most part, a modern woman. She fits into the Western feminist ideology of what the modern liberated woman should be. Her choice of polygamy over monogamy is to illustrate that African women find strength in "sisterhood" that polygamy offers i.e. shared household responsibilities, alternating conjugal roles etc. These shared responsibilities offer mobility to women. However, Aidoo leaves her audience to ponder over what's best for them. In other novels and plays by Aidoo, we observe women using culture to strengthen their identity and also gain independence from patriarchy.

For many centuries, women in West Africa have used art forms especially music, dance and other forms of performances to define spaces and narrate their lived experiences. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, West African female scholars relied on these forms of defined female spaces to construct and define feminism. To most West African feminists, these spaces are core reference points in constructing notions that inform the process of theorizing a definitive feminism. Gendered spaces and notions constructed in literary works too are reflective of these female spaces and their relationships to male constructed spaces. From Aidoo, Nwaka to Emecheta, female spaces are essential to the development of their narrative. The development and representation of female spaces have informed contemporary literary works and also, the performance of Western literary works adapted for the stage.

In the two adaptations under study, the focus on the mother trope is the point of departure from the Western and other cultural performances of *A Doll's House*. These two dramatists worked within the West African notion of "a mother does not leave her children", and their construction of Nora's role as a mother is reflective of this notion. Also, through this medium, they have created a platform for negotiating gendered spaces and their fluidity. However, as they developed their interpretations of the text, they are confronted with the multiplicities of female identity, and lived experiences. These factors to an extent impacted on the individual interpretation and the construction of the various stock characters and events in their lives.

While Utoh-Ezeajugh adapts and creates characters out of Ibsen's stock characters, Owusu retains them in their entirety. Of these two, Utoh-Ezeajugh's reconstruction puts her characters within culturally defined spaces. Within those

spaces she reconstructs the skewed representation of women. However, Owusu thought of presenting a production faithful to the text without cultural influences. But, her presentation of the closing scene borrowed cultural motifs to make a closing argument. She explains below:

I had to respect the playwrights view, but in line with my culture and philosophy as a director, I made Torvald inform the household of Nora's departure. Ann Marie the nursemaid, Helen the maid, and son Ivar ran after Nora; while the two other children remain seated to console their father. The lights went off (Owusu, 2006, 20).

Performances like these put dramatists in the middle of a culture clash. Yet, it serves as a resource to comparatively study and contest notions. For these two dramatists, the transposition of motifs from one culture to the other began a reception process for them and their audience.

The theme of female work and resourcefulness is well exhibited in Utoh-Ezeajugh's adaptation. In the beginning we see Nneora in her public sphere of work, the market. Markets in West Africa are the preserve of women. Here, women have power to control resources and to determine the constructive workable medium of exchange of goods and services. It is within this space that Nneora meets Ikenna. In this context, Nora has become Nneora and Helmer, Ikenna. Krogstad has transformed into Osita, Nneora's benefactor and friend. Nneora is a self-made woman who helps Ikenna pay off his debts owed to Mama Uduak from foodstuffs he had purchased some days ago. Again, she helps him secure a job in a reputable bank through Osita. Ikenna marries Nneora and they become parents of four beautiful girls and are expecting a set of twin girls though Ikenna desires male children. Further, her benefactor makes sexual advances at her and demands a final date for the favour he granted her some years ago. The seemingly happy family falls apart as Ikenna discovers the relationship between Nneora and her benefactor.

It is against this background of presenting economical resourceful and independent women that welcomed Utoh-Ezeajugh as African feminist dramatist. Instead of conforming to the reckless opportunism by most Nigerian feminist, and prolonging the status quo, Utoh-Ezeajugh seems to be involved in cleaning the Augean stables of Nigerian feminism (Asigbo, 2002, 269). The feminist movements in Nigeria and most part of West Africa are full of ideologies and emancipatory slogans imbibed from their Western counterparts. West African mainstream feminism is highly becoming politicized and sadly misappropriated. In some instances, the initiatives of this movements do not speak to the lived realities of women in these regions. In Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Who Own this Coffin?* (1999), we encounter a direct attack on the mainstream feminism being practised by Nigerian women.

It is in *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, that she took a reserve but analytical stance by transposing a character between two cultures. The significance of the character Nora as she travels through many cultures across the world is that she embodies every woman. The play, however, gives dramatists avenues to explore issues of women and gender roles. Holledge and Tompkins are of the view that *A Doll's House* gave European bourgeois women the opportunity to explore subjective

freedom through the process of empathy and identification at a specific stage in social modernity (Hollidge and Tompkins, 2000, 23). In transposing the views of Hollidge and Tompkins into the West African setting, *A Doll's House* is being employed as an avenue through which conscious West African women (as evident in the two productions especially that of Utoh- Ezeajugh) can re-write and re/define women's role and position. They can also speak to issues raised by western feminist theory.

At the core of these two productions is an emphasis on symbolism used in representing lived realities. Utoh-Ezeajugh's protagonist carries a symbolic responsibility in her name. Nneora literally translates as "mother of all". Nneora embodies Western African womanhood and chronicles the various stages of their adult lives. Through symbolism, Nneora as a character is defined. She also represents a thought system inasmuch as it is a reaction to the Western forms of defining womanhood. According to Asigbo, the symbolism in this name presents the protagonist as an embodiment of all that is virtuous in the quintessential woman (Asigbo, 2002, 269). For Owusu, the selective adjectives Helmer employs in naming Nora are very significant in understanding Helmer's perceptions of women, and if transposed on a larger scale represents a culture's perception of women. Owusu's analysis, in her notes, is as follows:

Nora as a symbol is called a number of names by Helmer throughout the play. These include "little songbird", "squirrel", "lark", "little feather head", "little skylark", "little person" and "little woman". Helmer is consistent about using the word 'little' before the names he calls her. These are usually followed by the possessive 'my', by this Helmer believes that his wife is more or less his property. Helmer's chosen names for her reveal that he does not see her as his equal by any means. Nora at times, as if expected, behaves like a doll or pet for him. There is a feminine low image of Nora as against Helmer's masculine bourgeois moral authority that has imprisoned her. (Owusu, 2006, 31-32 including excerpts from interviews).

In Africa, the idea of a "free woman" conjures negative images (Oduyoye, 1995, 4). Thus, presenting a "free woman" is done insightfully, as not to give a wrong notion of what a free woman ought to or ought not to be. In the Ghanaian production, Nora and Dr Rank's stocking scene was omitted. Promoting women's capability to negotiate for sex, this scene in various cultural contexts can be misrepresented and interpreted. Especially within the Ghanaian one, it can be perceived as Nora's undesirable sexual ploys or unfaithfulness to her husband. It derails, contextually, the director's motive of female emancipation, and also, takes away the urgency for her final decision. For Nora to achieve her desire of self-identity, freedom, and empathy in the eyes of the audience, she must be morally upright.

In both productions Nneora/Nora does not exit alone, which tells us that both directors struggled with the concept of a woman walking out on her family. Nneora, consumed with the role and status of motherhood, exits with her children, while Owusu's Nora walks out alone, but is pursued by her son and the two maids. Though very faithful to the text, Owusu finds difficulty divorcing herself from the cultural setting in which she works. Most often as observed, cultural identities are implicated

in an individual's reception of performance texts. In Ghana, for instance, there is a higher probability of defining women and women's role within the contexts of tradition and religion. Perhaps, it is against this background that Owusu develops her characters and the plot.

The mother trope is central in both adaptations. Whereas recent performances in Europe rarely play Nora as a mother and/or make reference to her children, motherhood is central to the lives of West African women. It serves as an identity and also a status from which the African feminist cannot divorce herself. Therefore, motherhood is intergral for the study of womanhood in this region. This is probably one of the main reasons that Western feminists find difficulty in classifying the African feminist. Mikell Gwendolyn, writing an introduction to *African Feminism: the politics of survival in sub-Saharan Africa* says that African women's refusal to subordinate their biological roles to other roles within their society leaves many Western feminist troubled (Mikell, 1997, 8). Mikell further posits that this nature-culture fusion is not likely to disappear in the near future (*ibid*). In view of this, one can understand the position of both dramatists in giving significance to the role of motherhood. In the final scene of the Nigerian adaptation, Nneora leaves her marital home with her children.

Nneora: No! I can't bear to spend the night in a strange man's house. My freedom starts from this night. I will fly like a bird. After my babies are born, I will re-organise my life. I will re-open my shop ... I will wake up the children and we shall soon be on our way (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2005, 123).

Nneora's quest for freedom cannot be equated to that of Nora. Here we encounter a heroine who has enjoyed some degree of self sufficiency. It is within marriage that she had limited access to the freedom she once experienced. In her search for freedom she still maintains her role of motherhood. This goes a long way to confirm Mikell's assertion that the nature-culture fusion of African feminism and/or perceptions of womanhood determines the decision that women make in this context. Nneora's decision also confirms the West African perception of motherhood and the importance of children. What Utoh-Ezeajugh is saying is that the most important step to achieving female liberation is women accepting their responsibilities, but finding avenues of successfully negotiating these responsibilities with their individual aspirations.

On the contrary, Nora in the Ghanaian performance sets out into freedom without her children. While Nora walks away from her marriage alone, the two maids and Ivar (her son) run after her. Owusu leaves her audience in suspense as one is left to wonder if she will have empathy for her children and return home. Again, we observe the influence of culture on the interpretation of Ibsen's symbolic representation of the nature-culture fusion and its effect on women. While he advocates women denouncing this relationship, his counterparts in West African a century later are proposing ways through which this relationship can be negotiated. Further, what these two adaptations are saying is that perhaps the struggle for female emancipation need not be confrontational. Awo Asiedu explains the position of Utoh-Ezeajugh and Owusu on the issue of feminism in the West African context.

The fact that we do not see Nneora leave slamming the door suggests a ray of hope of reconciliation and could be interpreted as the playwright's desire to lessen the blow on male sensibilities. It may also be an indication that perhaps the fight for equal rights by African women is not as confrontational as their counterparts elsewhere (Asiedu, 2011,10).

Helmer, informing his household of Nora's departure in Owusu's performance, is representative of informing the extended family of her departure. The two nurse maids and Ivar symbolically represent the extended family. The family is an institution of socialization and also reinforces roles and identity. Therefore, this reconstructed ending is entangled with the institution of culture from which Nora is running away. We can envisage the reinforcement of the societies' hold on an individual and also a recapture of Nora back into the doll house.

Conclusion

As Holledge and Tompkins wonder if the play still carries a discourse of European emancipatory feminism, Ezeajugh emphatically tells us in her adaptation that the discourse on European emancipatory feminism has been incorrectly applied in the African context and that the African woman has been incorrectly studied and understood. Owusu, on the other hand, flirts with the European discourse on emancipatory feminism and her cultural perceptions on womanhood. Her flirtation creates and promotes dialogue and a negotiation between women and culture. She creates a paradigm through which discourses of emancipatory feminism negotiate within the contexts in which they find themselves. Beyond the interpretation of Nora's slammed door are new waves of interpretations moving away from the norm. As revealed in this study, the symbol of the slammed door develops into many statements as it travels through many contexts. In this instance, it is not just a rebellion but a response to Western feminism and a call for negotiations.

In conclusion, these diverse interpretations reassure the audience of the thematical relevance of the play and also says that the door to Nora's home is the symbol that separates the domestic sphere from the public sphere. The overall symbolic theme of this play is that for a woman to be wholly 'free' or liberated, there must be fluidity between the domestic sphere and the public sphere.

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Summary

A Doll's House (1879) is the most read of Ibsen's plays in West Africa and the most performed. As the basis for the discourse on European emancipatory feminism, the play is presently being employed by selective dramatists in West Africa to contest the misinterpretation of the West African woman by European emancipatory feminists. Nora as a character creates a symbolic canvas on which the "real" African woman as envisaged by Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh in her adaptation titled *Nneora: an African doll's house* (2005) is drawn. Owusu Janet, another dramatist, faces the issues from a conservative feminist point of view with her interpretation of the play influenced by her cultural perceptions of the woman.

About the author

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