

# **A De/Constructive Analysis of Gendering in Irene Salami's *Idia, the Warrior Queen***

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## **Abstract**

Gender representation in drama and other literary forms has come under critical scrutiny across cultures, disciplines, and preoccupations. Stereotyping and the stereotyped portrayal of gender especially have been promoted in some of these texts. In the face of this reality, literary texts have subjected gender discourse to a critical evaluation under different terms such as feminism, chauvinism, patriarchy and a host of others. The divide between the genders has become more prominent with the female gender asking for emancipation and attention in contemporary times. This essay therefore examines the representation of the female gender in traditional Benin politics where it is presented as patriarchal in nature in the play, *Idia, the Warrior Queen* by Irene Salami. The authors attempt a de/constructive analysis of the text, adopting qualitative research methods and using content analysis of the primary source text. Books, articles in journals, magazines, newspapers and internet serve as secondary sources of reference. The theoretical framework adopted is Gender Theory, to interrogate the play and situate it within the purview of gender and society. The essay concludes that women such as Idia, the eponymous character in the play create a new narrative while challenging the *status quo*, despite the traditional Nigerian cum African societies' bias against the female gender.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Gender/Gendering, Patriarchal, Society, Benin Kingdom, Idia

## **Introduction**

Theatre, from its inception, has always taken form from its society and existed for its society. In a nutshell, drama-cum-theater is a social art reflecting a culture. As popular culture, theater cuts across genders, ages, ethnic group, and status. Thus, the theatre is a mirror of a society, its customs, history, and possible future. Consequently, society and culture play a major role in theater while theatre also serves as a major influence on culture and society. This is not far-fetched since the themes of drama are sourced from its social milieu. The many themes that theater has developed since its inception include the political situation of nations, ecology, people's rights and responsibilities, and gender issues. The role of women (the female gender) has now been subjected to critical interrogation in theatrical performance, and has been a source of controversy amongst theater scholars. This has led to such dramatic works as Tess Onwueme's *Reign of Wazobia* and *Shakara, the Dance Hall Queen*, Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* and *Sweet Trap*, and a host of others too numerous to mention in this study. However, one can trace this course back to the Greco-Roman period and Aristophanes' classic comedy with *Lysistrata* featured arguably as one of the earliest plays to explore the discourse of gender representation and the role and place of women in society.

The role of women and their social responsibilities within the African continuum has been structured within the patriarchal nature of the continent at large. Consider traditional religion that involves masquerading in certain parts of Nigeria. On African terrain, most masquerade theater or performance is male centered. For example, it is forbidden for women

to see the *Oro* and some other masquerades of the Yoruba people. It is believed that any woman who contravenes this precept is bound to face the negative consequence of her action.

Thus, in his *Ideology and Stage-craft in the Nigerian Theatre*, Ahmed Yerima states that:

The masculine traditional canon has always dominated the African consciousness concerning beliefs and existence. The culture, the religion, the languages, the names, the types of vocation, even the biological and physiological structure of human as determined by the environment and nature, have always re-emphasized the dominance of the male over his female counterpart. (59)

Yerima's assertion here is influenced by the socio-political and religious status of the Nigerian woman. The above quotation perhaps captures the crux of the gender issue in Nigeria and Africa in general. Of note in this statement is the absence of the fact that women are also part of the hegemony against their kind.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts the qualitative method of research via the instrumentation of content analysis and inferences. The primary source of research material is the chosen play text, *Idia, the Warrior Queen* by Irene Salami. Literary materials such as chapters in books, articles in journals, magazines, newspapers, and internet sources serve as secondary sources. This study critically analyzes the text using these sources.

### **Theoretical Framework: Gender Theory**

For the purpose of this essay, gender theory is deemed best to interrogate the core of the play, deconstructing gender in dramatic texts. According to Allyson Jule, "Gender theory is the study of what is understood as masculine and/or feminine and/or queer behaviour in any given context, community, society, or field of study" (32). This definition captures the

essence of gender roles and responsibilities as observed within African society. The social constructs of what should be for men and what should be for women is the bone of contention. Arguably, these constructs are rooted in the biological-cum-psychological definition of the two genders. Some argue, however, that even biological sex is socially constructed, although physiology may contribute to masculine and feminine behaviors (Fausto-Sterling 1).

According to biological approaches, psychological and behavioral gender differences are due to the biological differences between male and female. Within this family of approaches, researchers have focused on historical explanations, such as evolutionary processes and proximal explanations, such as genes and sex hormones. Evolutionary theorists, such as David Buss, emphasize that the survival of the human species is dependent on successful reproduction. Genes responsible for the strategies that lead to successful reproduction are more likely to be passed on to our descendants than the strategies that do not lead to reproductive success. “This evolutionary process is believed to lead to psychological gender differences because the behaviours needed for successful reproduction require gender differences” (67).

Social approaches to gender development thus view gender differences as a by-product of the differential treatment girls and boys receive from the people in their lives, and the pervasive gender stereotyped messages that people receive in their environments. This approach emphasizes socialization in the family, schools, and wider culture. The different roles and behaviors of females and males, children as well as adults, are shaped and reinforced by gender norms within society. There are social expectations that define appropriate behavior for women and men. For example, in some societies, being male is associated with taking risks, being tough and aggressive, and having multiple sexual partners.

This suggests that the way women are being portrayed in society is the way men believe they should be treated. For instance, if they are portrayed as objects of weakness in movies or any other medium that can influence public opinion, men may accept that.

Hence, gender theory is applicable to the research in the sense that when women are portrayed as weak in society through culture, social norms or such other means as movies that can influence opinion, it can lead to violating the right of equality and also to domestic violence. Albeit, when they are portrayed as strong and independent, it could reduce inequality as well as domestic violence. However, the concept of gender remains important in feminist theory because the essential qualities of gender remain a point of theoretical debate within feminism, and these debates offer a way of distinguishing among the varieties of feminist theory. *Idia as the Warrior Queen* is a social construct in history by the playwright, who probably relied on Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's idea that "feminist rhetoric in content drew its premises from a radical analysis of patriarchy, which identified the 'man-made world' as one built on the oppression of women." From another perspective, feminist theory holds that men and women will construct different types of structures about the self, and consequently, their thought processes may diverge in content and form.

### **Conceptual Review: Feminism**

It is pertinent to mention briefly that feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes. It is in the light of the above that feminism is defined as "an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism" (Day). However, a broad understanding of feminism includes women and men acting, speaking, and writing on women's issues and rights, and identifying social injustice in the *status quo*. Feminism can also be described as an art, act, or craft of

overturning all, or most, gender inequality with the intent of liberating women from subjugation and obtaining women rights. These are rights that they are denied, or feel they are denied, in male dominated societies. Menaka Philips sees feminism as:

the freedom to decide her destiny, freedom from sex determined roles, freedom from society's oppressive restrictions: freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert the free thoughts into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of women's right to individual conscience and judgment, it postulates that women's essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on another relationship of her life. (68)

It can also be defined as a shared contemplation and advocacy of equality between men and women. For the purpose of this essay, feminism is perceived as the struggle for emancipation which in Idia's case is the right to live. It is in this light that this struggle can be ideological as Mabel Ewrierhoma contends, saying that "feminist ideology is a protest ideology, opposed to the hemming in of women but desirous of their emancipation in all spheres of life in decrying the negative stereotypical roles women are made to play in texts scripted by men..." (15). She further declares that "feminist ideology reflects how women actively, and not resignedly, act out their roles in society thereby proffering a link between the text and the context in which it signifies. This results in the debunking of patriarchal ideologies that delimit the woman" (16).

## **Gender**

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender emphasizes that masculinity and femininity are products of social, cultural, and psychological factors that are acquired by an individual in the process of becoming a man or woman. Gender is that which can be said

to divide humans into two categories, namely male and female. It is admitted by Cranny-Francis that “gender organises virtually every realm of human life; it is reflected in our sleeping, eating, watching, speaking and lots more.” It is also the physical and social condition of being male or female as shown clearly in the text, *Idia, The Warrior Queen* as well as other dramatic texts. Ekwierhoma also suggests that

Gender issues have become important aspects of Nigerian dramatic creativity. Many dramatists have occupied their dramatic output with inter-gender relations around male-female relations and power dynamics. This is taking into cognizance the expanded gender terrain which now includes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual orientations. Recent events in the Nigerian polity have showed that the need is more pertinent than ever to bridge the gender gap between male and female in text and context. (135)

Today, gender is part of the broader socio-cultural context and forms a crucial criterion for literary analysis. If we proceed from the assumption that all characterisation is gendered, as it indeed is, then we will have no difficulty relating to the fact that representation is similarly gendered. Irene Salami has given the world a hard nut to chew in the play under study, as in some of her other plays.

### **Representation**

Representation is to depict, to portray, to reflect, and to project. Furthermore, representation is the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. It is also the way that someone or something is shown or described. It may be a sign or symbol of something. The Iyoba is a symbolic role in the narrative of the Benin kingdom and it can be traced to the very first Iyoba in the person of Idia, the eponymous character in the play.

This is how Irene Salami characterizes Idia in the play, defending the crucial role played by the queen mother at that critical moment of Benin history. Ekwierhoma affirms this:

Female dramatic creativity portrays women in situations that affect them positively or adversely. In female textual creations, it is not unusual to find women playing active roles, with the men decentred and the women centred, leading to the former revolving round the latter. This axis is crucial in feminist drama and is the pivot of current trends in female playwriting. (30)

## **Culture**

Culture in this study refers to the by-product of people's interactions in life. It is a system of knowledge, ideas, values, beliefs, norms, customs, and technology shared by everyone in the society (Oyekan 182). Culture is not static, ruling out every element of stagnation. In its real sense, culture is not irrational or illogical. Rather, it always advances from a condition of relative imperfection. According to Taylor et al, Culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society" (209). Culture is therefore the collective treasure of a people, their shared life, fears, aspirations, and their struggle to preserve and redefine the past in order to make sense of the present and chart the way to a brighter future.

## **Synopsis of *Idia, the Warrior Queen***

*Idia, the Warrior Queen* is the story of the first Iyoba of Benin. Idia, newly widowed after the death of her husband, the Oba of Benin, is expected to die, to facilitate her son's ascension to the throne, in accordance with custom. Seeing the irresponsibility and the colossal waste of the practice, she, alongside her son, Oba Esigie, decide to challenge the *status quo*. Against the wishes of the chiefs, they prevail and that sets some of the chiefs



against her. Idia is then given an official title in the royal cabinet, the Iyoba of Benin, the first holder of an office specially created for her.

In the long run, one of the Benin chiefs grows discontented and commits treason. The war that follows is planned and led by the courageous and very much alive Idia, the Iyoba. Bewildered by the prospect of a female warrior, the other chiefs are not too enthusiastic about the plan until she returns victorious. The victory uplifts her in the eyes of all and justifies the sparing of her life in the first place. In sum, this play is a historical play that is written from a feminist viewpoint celebrating the first Iyoba of Benin, Idia. It speaks of tradition being revised in order that Idia live and how she saves the Benin people from a shameful defeat through her courage, planning, and wisdom.

### **Thematic Preoccupation of the Play**

The theme of a play is its central message firmly embedded within the dialectic of the playwright's ideology. It is what the story intends to preach and the messages passed across to the audience. Francis Hodge explains that:

Theme is an idea of a play, the core meaning of what it has to say. Idea is both derived from an assessment of the characters in both action and is a summary statement of such action consequently. The idea is the sum total of the play script. (48)

This means the motive of a play script is first to communicate a message that resonates with society. Another definition of theme is given by Sam Smiley who states that a theme is

The statement of a drama, the meaning and intuitive inspiration which prompted the writing of the script by the dramatist. It is the vision of an inner meaning of life and the human situation which the dramatist as an artist

discovered in nature and being an emotional personal response to life, the discovery of themes must also be to some extent an emotional venture. (148)

Based on the scholarly opinions, then, the theme is used as a backdrop for the plot of Irene Salami's *Idia, the Warrior Queen*. A play may have several themes but only one major plot with sub-themes. Themes often explore historically common or cross-culturally recognizable ideas, such as ethical questions, and are usually implied rather than stated explicitly. The central theme of this play is simply Nationalistic Drive; it is around this that the plot is woven. Despite having all odds against her because she is female, Idia as a character rises to show that though she is a woman, she is as capable, if not more capable, than the men in her society. Moreover, her love for her land is by no means diminished by her gender. Her dialogue in this meeting with the chiefs is an indicator:

**Iyase:** Your Majesty, have you ever heard or seen a woman going to war?

**Idia:** You are seeing one right here. The fire that roasts a snake is never as long as the snake.

**Esogban:** You are correct, but you must realize that no one has asked you to embark on this journey.

**Idia:** Really? So, who is willing to go? When it becomes clear that it is one's turn to head the village, you don't go consulting the oracle to find out why.

Right now, I have no choice; I just have to prepare for war. (n.pag.)

Idia shows her vigor and love for the Edo kingdom in her words and actions. Esogban's lines bespeaks derision and doubt but it is not enough to dampen Idia's fire. Other prominent themes herein include Tradition, Patriarchy, Betrayal and Love. Other sub-themes include Politics, and Hypocrisy. With respect to Tradition being a major sub-theme of *Idia, the warrior queen*, the story revolves around the role of *Iyoba* in Benin traditional culture. The

basic conflict in the play centers on the patriarchy's struggle with Idia to enforce the barbaric custom of killing her as the king's mother. Betrayal is notable in the acts of the erring chief and Idia becoming the embodiment of national love as well as motherly love and human love. The people are tired of rigid tradition in the sense that they want the *Iyoba* to die as they see no further use of her after producing the next king.

### **The Legend of *Idia* in Benin History**

This account in an essay by Alexander Bortolot may suffice here:

The kingdom of Benin (in present-day Nigeria) was plunged into a state of turmoil at the end of the fifteenth century when the Oba (king) Ozolua died and left two powerful sons to dispute succession. His son, Esigie controlled Benin City, while another son, Arhuan, was based in the equally important city of Udo, about twenty miles away. The ensuing civil war severely compromised Benin's status as a regional power and undermined Benin City's place at the political and cultural center of the kingdom. Exploiting this weakness, the neighboring Igala peoples sent warriors across the Benue River to wrest control of Benin's northern territories. Esigie ultimately defeated his brother and conquered the Igala, reestablishing the unity and military strength of the kingdom. His mother, Idia received much of the credit for these victories as her political counsel, together with her mystical powers and medicinal knowledge, were viewed as critical elements of Esigie's success on the battlefield. To reward and honor her, Esigie created a new position within the court called the *Iyoba*, or queen mother, which gave her significant political privileges, including a separate residence with its own staff.

As mother of the king, Idia and later Iyobas wielded considerable power. Until recent times, the queen mother, who bore the Oba's first son, had no other children and devoted her life to raising the future ruler of the kingdom, a role she was destined to play even before her own birth. Queen mothers were therefore viewed as instrumental to the protection and well-being of the Oba and, by extension, the kingdom. Indeed, Obas wore carved ivory pendant masks representing the Iyoba during ceremonies designed to rid the kingdom of malevolent spiritual forces. An especially fine example of such masks in the Metropolitan Museum's collection dates from the sixteenth century and is believed to depict Idia herself. Two vertical bars of inlaid iron between the eyes allude to medicine-filled incisions that were one source of Idia's metaphysical power. Within the court, the queen mother's political status was equal to that of a senior chief, and she enjoyed the right to commission precious works of art for personal and devotional use. Images of the Iyoba found on the cast brass objects with which she was associated, such as *ikegobo* (altars to the hand) and *urhoto* (rectangular altarpieces), portray her in a shirt of coral beads flanked by attendants bearing symbols of political and spiritual power. These attendants, also depicted in carved ivory, were women under the tutelage of the Iyoba destined for marriage to her son, the future Oba. As with ancestral Obas, deceased Iyobas were venerated with cast-brass memorial heads fitted with carved ivory tusks and displayed on royal altars (2003).

### **A De/Constructive Analysis of Gendering in the Play**

To set the tone for the analysis, reference is made to the opening scene, the tradition of the killing of Queen Mothers is discussed by Idia herself and another character:

**Idia:**... Iyesogie, what does the future hold for me? Life or death?

**Iyesogie:** My queen, you know our tradition very well. It is rigid, it is unshakeable. It is unchangeable. Our tradition is like the leopard's spots. They cannot be washed off. Tradition must be obeyed if we must move ahead peacefully.

**Idia:** (Raising her voice, she rises from her seat) No, Iyesogie. For a very long time I thought so too. I used to believe tradition was unchangeable, but now I think you are wrong...

**Iyesogie:** Your Majesty, you know as well as I do that the death of a Queen Mother is not as a result of any criminal offence, yet, the entrance of a new king demands the eternal exit of the Queen Mother.

**Idia:** No, Iyesogie. I say no, not any more. The last of the Queen Mothers destined for death died with the death and burial of Oba Ozolua's mother. I, Idia, will not die. I refuse to die. (*Idia* 4)

Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh argues that "Nigerian female playwrights have over the years evolved a literary style that is unique in its effective rendering of not just woman-centred concerns but harmonious gender co-existence and the smooth functioning of society and societal organs" (143). Salami's adventure in *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* fits this description. Idia takes on the issue of cultural subjugation and rises to the occasion by assuming a responsibility that tradition confers on her but goes a step further in taking up the role of defender of the culture and legacy of her people as the Iyoba, quashing the rebellion against her and the throne. Although most of the men are afraid to face the Oba's enemies, Idia demonstrates extraordinary heroism in confronting the Idah warriors and saving her people from them.

Unfortunately, the patriarchal image of women persists and even affects religious beliefs in many cultures. For example, in some countries in Africa and the Pacific, girls are encouraged to get married or get a job rather than pursue further education. Ummu Jummai, speaking on this, states that “in many of these countries, there is a social preference for male children and decisions to invest in male gender education are often made at the expense of girls who are required to help with domestic chores at home for all or part of the school day” (27). However, it is high time women put behind them whatever could be construed as cultural, traditional, political, social, or economic self-limitations and fight any inferiority complex. Gone are the days when female writers were docile and inactive about issues important to women. The days are over when factors such as age, education, gender, sex, and marriage as well as the critical attitude of male critics used to be barriers to female creativity and triumph.

Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction challenges the categorical distinctions of philosophies of presence, by effecting a reversal of the hierarchy in a binary opposition, and then ultimately questioning the basis of the distinction. Female playwrights have been doing that. Today, the narrative has changed, with the efforts of dramatic creative writers such as Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami (now Irene Agunloye), Stella Dia Oyedepo, Julie Okoh, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh. Evwierhoma (2013) opines that:

The upsurge in female creativity arose out of the need for women to articulate themselves through the media of drama, prose, and poetry, so that their audiences would have a first-hand account of Nigerian feminine realities, which had hitherto been dominantly rendered by male writers (24).

Their works have over time countered chauvinistic writings that seek to project the female as inferior. They have emerged with a gendered perspective to the oppressive socio-

cultural conditions under which women had to function (Utoh-Ezeajugh 134). Largely, they were successful and that opened the door to the struggle for emancipation and gender equality. According to Azunwo and Omovwiomo, female dramatists have made it a point of duty to use the theater as a vehicle for transformation and raising women's consciousness (3). As of the twenty-first century, there are a number of such dramatists -- Julie Okoh and Oludolapo Ojediran for example. Chinenye Amonyze suggests that:

Playwrights have a knack, in voicing their personal opinions, to not only prick the public conscience but also act as vehicles for social, economic and political changes. Since their art is parasitic on the society, which they base the lives of their dramatic personas on, their creations end up revealing the major defects in the society's attitude towards burning existential issues (22).

The Nigerian female writers through their creative efforts have made concrete attempts to consciously or unconsciously effect a radical transformation of the naïve thinking of the docile and passive Nigerian woman. They advocate for an active and lucid woman who will be informed ideologically of her needs, her identity, and the position she ought to have in society. This is why most female creators portray "women in diverse images and situations which affect them positively or adversely...the portrayal of women tends to become a primary assignment for the female writer, especially the dramatist" (Evwierhoma 31).

## **Conclusion**

Deconstructing the concept of gender in a patriarchal society is what Irene Salami has consciously done in her work; *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*. The notion that African society is patriarchal and devoid of women's rights is firmly entrenched in the historical Edo play that sees the fight for women's emancipation led by Idia, the first Iyoba of the Benin Kingdom. This essay has argued for a call for freedom and equity of gender in society. The

exemplary leadership and courage demonstrated by Idia, as well as other women in history, deserve to be celebrated.

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