

## SHADES OF RADICAL FEMINISM IN ZULU SOFOLA'S *THE SWEET TRAP* AND IRENE SALAMI'S *SWEET REVENGE*

By

**ADEDOKUN-AWOJODU, Blessing**

General Studies Department, Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria

[blessing.adedokun@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng](mailto:blessing.adedokun@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng)

**Abstract:** *Feminism is a common yardstick by which works of female writers all over the world are interrogated. However, the feminist elements in individual writer's work vary as well as the approaches they employ in tackling feminist issues. Zulu Sofola, being the first female African playwright, has been given credit for daring to address feminist issues in drama, which remained unaddressed before her. For this, she was tagged a radical. However later feminists, in their works, appear to be even more radical, and one of such is Irene Salami's Sweet Revenge (2004) are plays expressing different feminist ideologies which underlay the differences in the realities of each of their writers despite their shared origin. This paper, drawing instances from the plays of Zulu Sofola and Irene Salami, showcases one as a liberal feminist and the other as radical. This assertion is profoundly drawn from the realities of each writer, the issues they address in their works, and the way they address them. The background of each playwright, the themes of their plays, the characters in the plays and their significance to feminist issues, are examined to justify each writer's feminist ideology. Although these works have many similarities, they are pointers to the obvious radicalism of one and the relative liberality of the other. The position of this paper therefore, is that Feminism itself has always been a radical movement. It will continue to evolve in varying degrees and shades of radicalism as long as there are needs for women's experiences across cultures to be addressed.*

**Keywords:** liberal, radical, feminist, ideology, playwright

### 1. Introduction

The Nigerian dramatic scene had been populated, obviously, by male writers, before one woman broke the glass ceiling and became the first female playwright in Africa. Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and a host of others had written plays addressing different societal issues and they inevitably feature female characters in them. However, critics have argued that the representation of the women in the works of many male Nigerian playwrights were not fair "In male-centred writings, women are inferior, second class citizens and sexual objects. They are often treated as slaves, the wretched of the earth, and properties to be acquired by men" (Nwanya and Ojemudia, 2014:53).

Women are said to have been misrepresented and their voices remained unheard for as long as intellectually-engaging endeavours such as playwriting were not interfered with by women. There was no first-hand representation of the experiences of the woman in drama by male writers. The men enjoyed the monopoly of projecting whatever image of the woman that suited their ego and interest in the patriarchal society. Then Zulu Sofola came. Her emergence as a playwright was an obvious challenge to the on-goings in the dramatic scene, for everyone knew that her account of the woman's experience would be a realistic one. She was, through her writings, giving first-hand representations of the female experience. And she drew a lot from her own personal experiences to create her craft. Sofola's plays address the issues germane to the woman, such as forced marriage, women oppressing women, true love, woman's dedication and loyalty to the family and so on.

Comparatively, Irene Salami's arrival on the dramatic scene was a latter one, and her address of the issues relating to the woman in the Nigerian society is also relatively new. In other words, despite



her latter arrival, salami belongs to the unique class of female agitators who deviate from the norms in addressing the issues faced by women. This deviation has been labelled radical by many critics.

The concept of radical feminism has created an image of modern feminist writers, as extremists in their quests to eliminate the idea of male supremacy in societies. The attempts to dismantle gender roles created by patriarchy have led to arguments for and against the rise of radical feminism. This paper, in juxtaposing the two feminist ideologies (radical and liberal feminism), seeks to clarify and justify these shades as emergent: each serving its own unique purposes and tackling its own unique problems best as it may. That is, the ideologies themselves should not be the bone of contention but the nature of the feminist issues they are employed to tackle.

Using the female characters of both plays, with particular attention on the major female ones, the paper aims to clarify the phenomena that form the basis of these feminist ideologies so as to establish both ideologies as effective in tackling the unique problems of their times. The proponents of the radical and liberal feminist ideologies are not few, and though many contemporary female writers are tagged radical, this paper has chosen one playwright from each ideology in order to achieve its stated objective. More so, Zulu Sofola and Irene Salami have a shared ethnic origin. As writers tend to represent their realities in their writings, a comparative study of the dramatic styles of these two women in addressing feminist issues may be a potent approach in analysing the idea of radicalism in feminism..

### **What is Liberal Feminism?**

Jaggar, Alison (1983) in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* says “liberal feminism has always been a voice though one that often has gone unheard, throughout the 300-year history of liberal political theory” (pg. 27). She further argues that “The overriding goal of liberal feminism always has been the application of liberal principles to women as well as to men” (35).

To throw more light on the political theory of liberalism, she explains its core concepts which are: democracy, rationality, equal right, or equal representation. In her words “Early feminists had to argue for women’s right by showing that women were indeed capable of reason” (9). In other words, Liberal feminism seeks to establish the woman as an equal member of the society who has her own quota to contribute to the smooth running of that society. Not an inferior or an irrelevant, she just wants her equal portion of the society-legally.

Roth et al explain that:

“Liberal feminism grows out of western liberal philosophy, whose origin Jaggar traces to the triumph of capitalism over feudalism. In this tradition, the most defining and important mark of being human is rationality. The capacity for reason is shared by almost all humans but it is a trait held by individuals, not groups.”

”Individuals act rationally to attain their own desires and interests; governments exist to promote as much opportunities as possible for them to do so, while keeping one individual’s “pursuit of happiness” from violating that of others”. (53)

Thus, liberal feminists argue that the principles of liberalism cut across all humans including women, that the pursuit of man’s happiness is not at the expense of the woman or vice versa, and that policies are made to ensure that things are actually so.



**What is Radical Feminism?**

According to Jaggar (1983) “Radical feminism is unmistakably a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon since its birth in the late 1960s...a flourishing women’s culture concerned with providing feminist alternatives in literature” (34). The radicalism in this approach to feminism is hence its provision of alternatives for the patriarchal system rather than an attempt to survive despite it, which is what liberal feminism favours. Jaggar further states that “Radical feminism argues that ...the genders are not different but equal” (85). Therefore, seeing herself as being equal to a man, a radical feminist pitches herself against the man in her society; engages him in contests.

Lewis (2016) says:

Radical feminism opposes existing political and social organisation in general because it is inherently tied to patriarchy. Thus, radical feminists tend to be sceptical of the political action within the current system.

A radical feminist aims to dismantle patriarchy, rather than making adjustments to the system through legal changes.

Every feminist writing that challenges the headship of the man or his authority over the female gender and seeks to overthrow such authority can therefore be called radical.

In the words of Roth, et al (2016) “Radical feminists may define female biology as the problem or the solution, or they may identify the purported existence of two sexes as the problem.” The radical feminist does not seek for equality between the sexes; rather she means to see a sexless world. Radical feminism does not believe in role division on gender basis, because it does not see gender as a yardstick by which anything should be attained.

From the foregoing therefore, one can infer that while liberal feminism favours gender complementarity, radical feminism favours gender abolition.

**Sofola’s Feminist Ideology**

Sofola is essentially a feminist, what category of feminist shade she belongs is however, of concern here. And she clarifies this in her words thus: “A parcel is like a wife, while the cord used to tie the parcel is like a husband. If the cord breaks, the parcel falls into pieces” (*King Emene*, 1974: 34). This quote from one of her books explains Sofola’s liberal feminist perspective and this is what is projected in her work that is examined in this paper.

Also, Elaine Savoy Fido, in “A Question of Realities: Zulu Sofola’s ‘The Sweet Trap’”, posits that “Sofola is indisputably allied with tradition, but it is a thinking one and a selective alliance and one which is perfectly able to co-exist...” (1987: 62) Thereby, Elaine acknowledges the liberal nature of Sofola’s Feminism.

This paper identifies Sofola’s feminist ideology not just as being liberal but also as “gender complementary”; an ideology which is formed on the basis of mutual dependence or inter-dependence between the two genders. This is usually evident in how most of her conflicts are resolved especially in the play under study-*The Sweet Trap*.

Sofola is considered by Jeremiah Methuselah (2008) as one of the liberal Nigerian Feminists. In that, though her work is interested in the condition of the Nigerian woman as a subjugated and insignificant other in her society, she does not explicitly shun the traditional perception of the role of the woman as dictated by the society. Nwanya and Ojemudia say “her presiding ideology is based on the premium that African women should study the traditional system and place of women defined by it” (53).

Sofola herself submits in one of her interviews:

“I feel the so-called modern educated women are ignorant of what the woman is in tradition, and on top of that are arrogant. If they would only allow themselves to look, they would find that they have no place either in the superstructure which came from Europe or in the tradition which they are rejecting” (Fido, 1987)

Hence, Sofola’s position is that the Nigerian woman’s lack of knowledge or adherence to the provisions of the tradition is the first cause of her marginalisation. She then campaigns that the woman returns to



tradition, because she feels that traditions have provided a fair enough place for the woman to be equally relevant in her society.

In relating Sofola's feminist ideology and the realities of the time in which she lived, Nwanya and Ojemudia, calling her "Queen of Realities" conclude that "she finds tradition to contain reality for her in a way European culture in Africa does not". This of course is contrary to what we can profess of the radical feminist.

### **How Sofola Reflects Her Ideology in Her Works**

Zulu Sofola's background as a Nigerian and as a christian contributes greatly to her opinion on gender issues and this opinion, she imbues without reserve, into her characters. Every now and then, we see her characters leaning towards traditional norms more than the Eurocentric values. She usually manages to strike a compromise between her traditional African, christian background and her western values. Ultimately, Sofola seeks social justice in her works without being biased or partial, but rather objectively.

Evident in her works also, are the realities that characterise the periods in which these plays are set. Realities which could not be so radically approached with much success for it was the dawn of the feminist agitation in Nigerian drama.

According to her in an interview "...because of my belief that one will not understand people even as characters unless you understand what moulded them and the world in which they move, and live and have their being, because it is that world that determines what they should value, what punishment they should expect should they do certain things and also what reward..." (Fido, 1987:59). No one could analyse or truly appreciate Sofola's ideological investments into her works except they first understand the realities of her time. Hence, Zulu Sofola's resolves advocate reason, understanding that there was not much that the woman could do for herself without the man at the time, but hoping that both genders would reach a compromise.

It is then justified to say that Sofola's sojourn in the western world, more than anything else, may have influenced her rejection of western feminism and her preference for the African version. This, Fido affirms in her words "she finds tradition contains reality for her in a way European culture in Africa does not" (Fido, 1987: 63). This preference, Sofola so eloquently justifies in *Sweet Trap* which this paper seeks to analyse. **THE SWEET TRAP**

This is a story of a family, a perfect specimen of a modern elite Nigerian home. Mr Femi Sotubo and Clara, his wife, are learned people, but evidently, rather than make their lives better; their education has only served to cause confusion for them. Clara, being led on in the spirit of modern western feminism, plots to defy her traditional husband by flouting his legislation to cancel her birthday party. We know that Femi's education, like every typical Nigerian man, has not robbed him of his consciousness of his position as the law-maker and enforcer in his home. He maintains that the oke-badan festival which his wife and her friend- Mrs Okon condemn as sexist, is their right as men. He maintains that men need a season like that to relax even if it pokes fun at the sexuality of the women.

Clara gets the assistance of her American friend Mrs Okon- a western feminist, Fatima, and other friends unclear about their social positions like herself, who decide to help her host her party in Fatima's house. Femi pretends to not mind this violation of his headship and even attends the party. He has however employed the services of local masquerades to disrupt the party, shaming his wife and causing enmity between her and her friends in the process.

Femi, for being violated as the ruler of his home, threatens to divorce his wife and the latter, knowing the social implication, is humbled-or rather helped to become sufficiently humbled through the intervention of Dr. Jinadu and his wife. These two are the only voice of reason in the whole chaos.

Dr. Jinadu is able to restore order by making each party realise its fault and make amends. He and his wife point out to the couple what their roles are towards one another, so long as they choose to be together. They are able to broker peace eventually, by making Clara kneel down to apologise to her husband, who admits he disrupted the birthday party. Femi evidently forgives his truly broken wife, not



without a sense of remorse himself, but also satisfied that his headship of his house and dignity as the man is restored to him.

### **Sofola's Dramatic Style**

Sofola employs traditional and modern settings in her plays, and explores topical themes such as divorce, marital rebellion, marital deceit, vengeance, erosion of culture, abuse of power, self-marginalisation, ills of western civilisation, adultery, women's powerlessness, and true love.

She often employs comparison, something like a conflict between modernisation and tradition, in which case tradition often wins. She also lays emphasis on the need for the woman to be reasonable in her quest for social justice, as she often fails unless she does so. These, she is able to achieve by using unique characters; characters that express her opposing views, and how one succeeds and the other fails. Clara and Femi represent modernity while Dr. Jinadu and his wife represent tradition.

Sofola also employs the use of myth and the festival trope in her plays. This is so evident in *The Sweet Trap* as in other Sofola's plays such as: *king Emene* and *Wedlock of the Gods*. The Oke-badan festival forms a major part of the conflict. It is the first clash of interests mentioned in the play and it sets the atmosphere for the imminent crisis in Femi's home. Through this festival, we are able to interrogate the person of Femi and Clara based on their dispositions towards the festival.

She also imputes religious undertones into her works, in this case, the christian religion. In way of biblical doctrines, Sofola makes her characters see that it's their only route to salvation from their predicaments. She makes Clara submit to her husband, and makes Femi love her in return. This is in accordance with biblical doctrine on the husband-wife relationship.

### **Irene Salami's Ideology**

Irene Salami's feminist ideology has been labelled a radical one owing to the depiction of her characters. Her male characters are portrayed as undeserving evil geniuses, hence empowering her women to take charge. Her *Sweet Revenge* is viewed as the most radical of her works as she writes her female characters into strong political positions. Nwanya and Ojemudia in reaction to this say "The battle by Nigerian female writers to write women into positive relevance takes a radical stance with the entrance of women into politics" (56).

Though she has a liberal predecessor in Zulu Sofola, one can say that Irene lives in an age that leaves women with no choice but to deviate from or improve upon the feminist agitations of the early feminist playwrights/writers. Evwierhoma, Mabell, (2009) in her paper "Rising Profile of Female Dramatist Irene Salami and New Nigerian Woman-centred Drama" says "The centredness of women and the milieu in which they find themselves in her plays reveal growing interest in more women having stronger voice in plays, telling their own stories and affirming themselves" (41). It is here deduced that feminists are realists and as the realities of Nigerian women change, from ignorance to knowledge, so also do the feminist stances in drama change from liberal to radical- not because it is planned by writers but because they are duty bound to record experiences as they are in reality. Many women have ventured into modern politics in real life and have succeeded. It therefore suffices to say that the radicalism in modern drama is a reflection of the radical nature of modern feminist agitations in real life.

In the opinion of Evwierhoma, (41) Salami's tendency to give political power to women in her stories is an affirmation of Bryson's submission that 'we cease to treat men as the unquestioned norm of humanity and make masculinity come up for scrutiny' Irene Salami further shows this defiance of the status quo in questioning some of the most profound patriarchal sensibilities/myths in her *Idia: the Warrior Queen of Benin* (2008) as she calls to question the Abobaku ideology of Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman*. In it, she advocates for the woman (more than anyone else) to decide her own fate, to choose to live or to die, and not to do either because the male-dominated society has designed it so. Her strong and warrior Queen Idia she empowers to defy this tradition which Wole Soyinka's Elesin Oba or his son, Olunde, cannot. Thus, encouraging the woman to take her fate into her own hands and not thoughtlessly follow subjugating traditions. This foregrounds Nwanya and Ojemudia's view that "the philosophy received a bash in Salami's *Idia, The warrior Queen of Benin*.





The playwright insists that such tradition is archaic and out-dated. She therefore demands for a change” (55).

### **How Irene Salami Shows her Ideologies in Her Plays**

Some of Salami’s early works are: *Emotan* (2001), *Idia*, *The Warrior Queen of Benin* (2008) and *Sweet Revenge* (2004). Why does Salami choose from historical repertoire to document her first works? How have those stories been told before she ventured to retell them? How does she retell them? Are there Sentiments--feminine sentiments? These are questions whose answers will enable us understand and appreciate Irene Salami’s representation of her feminist ideology in her plays.

Salami focuses her interest on the strengths of her female characters and on the weaknesses of her male characters. Her male protagonists are often villainous weaklings or evil geniuses, and her female protagonists are strong, strong-willed, rational, empowered and informed. Women who do not walk in the shadows of their men but are able to affirm themselves are mobilised to achieving a common goal in her plays. She also gives vivid and justifiable reasons for her revolutionary women to revolt.

Women in Irene Salami’s plays are not supplanters but supporters and this enables them to fight as one. The resolutions of her conflicts are non-traditional. They are often against the design of the Nigerian patriarchal set-up, but rather favour the woman and appear to debase the man.

### **Sweet Revenge**

This is a story of a family crisis that turns to societal/political one. Dr. Sota Ojo is Dr. Sosa Ojo’s Husband and father of her four kids, who goes abroad to study after asking his wife to leave her gynaecological practice to look after their kids. While away, Sota gets into relationship with a white woman, Cheryl, and gets her pregnant. Upon the transition from military to civilian rule in Nigeria, Sota is called upon by his senatorial district to represent them at the parliament. He returns to Nigeria with Cheryl, but not to his wife. Sota contests for and wins the election through the massive support of the women in his district.

He leaves his wife and marries Cheryl, who is unaware of the existence of a first wife, and goes on to enjoy his life as a senator. Whereas, before leaving her, Sota tells Aisosa that the latter has lost her sexual appeal to him, and so he is justified in his decision. Sosa moves on with her life by first getting herself financially empowered - she finds a job and continues catering for her kids.

When Sota seems to have forgotten all the promises he made to the women in his senatorial district, the women send delegates to remind him. He takes this as a violation of his peace and gets the women sent arrested. The women return with rage and, in revenge, see that Sota is recalled from his service as senator.

Cheryl finds out about the existence of a first wife and goes looking for her in her Ede residence. She apologises to Sosa, and files for a divorce from her husband. She confronts Sota with her discovery and disappointment and finally leaves him to return to the United Kingdom. Once she is back home, Cheryl organises an award for Sosa for being an outstanding woman who has organised herself in the face of a challenging situation.

Sosa, having bagged such great international profile, is considered the most suitable to occupy the vacant senatorial seat left by her husband. With the help of the women in her region, she is able to attain the position of a senator. She not only becomes a two-term senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, she equally rises to become the senate president.

Sota suffers a reversal of fortune being divorced and recalled. Bankers come after him for the repayment of the loans he acquired for his study abroad. He then tries to straighten things out with his first wife, Sosa but the latter rebuffs him.

### **Irene Salami’s Dramatic Style**

As seen in her *Sweet Revenge*, Salami employs dramatic and suggestive characters with suggestive names. Examples are: Madam Power, Madam Executive, Show dem etc. She also draws



women from all works of life to foster her liberation movement. This shows her as an undisguised feminist, agitator, and goes further to give 'strong' impressions of her women.

Her works employ themes such as rebellion against tradition, unity, betrayal of trust, masculine greed, power tussle, social justice, courage/bravery, resilience and likes. She lets her heroine mature through patience, perseverance and dedication, to justify her imminent triumph over marginalisation in her society.

Benedict Binebai (n.d) says of Irene Salami: The playwright in the construction of the drama places serious attention on a cause and effect plot configuration to validate the revolt of the women in the play (152) She further affirms that:

Salami draws on all the female characters in the drama and some male feminist characters like Regie, through a deliberate construction of character contrivance and thematic manipulation to fight and end male oppression. This is a logical expression of radical feminist predisposition in the representation of womanhood and motherhood in a constructive deportment (160-161).

### 3. A Comparative Analysis of Sofola's and Salami's Plays

One's attention cannot but be drawn to the similarities in these plays under study despite the fact that they are obviously different in a number of ways. Having mentioned earlier that Zulu Sofola and Irene Salami possess related ancestral backgrounds and have inevitably shared myths, our attention in this paper is drawn to the titles of these plays: *Sweet Trap* and *Sweet Revenge*. One cannot but wonder the essence of the common word "sweet" and in what sense each of them uses it. 'Sweet' for Sofola is evidently not 'Sweet' for Salami. This is deducible from the resolution of the conflict in each play. The man (representing tradition) has the final laugh in *The Sweet Trap*, while the Woman (representing modernity) has the final laugh in *Sweet Revenge* but each of the playwrights thinks the resolution of her conflict is SWEET.

Similar also are the subjects/themes, addressed by these playwrights. They both focus on the family, husband-wife relationship and the theme of submission and dedication are up for scrutiny. The idea of women uniting against or for a common course is also addressed, although the outcomes are not the same with the playwrights. Sofola and Salami also use women drawn from all works of life in their plays, the black, the white, the educated and the illiterates catch the fancy of both playwrights.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the two playwrights, some areas of differences have been identified in this paper. These differences inform the conclusions about the feminist ideology of each of the playwrights. Such differences are seen in:

**Characterisation:** the naming of Salami's characters alone establishes the radical-feminist undertone of the story. Salami's women are not only informed but they are also empowered. Names like Madam Power, Show dem, Madam Executive, suggest women who are resilient and self-reliant, while Sofola prefers to use the "Mrs" characters.

**Use of foreign/white characters:** Sofola's character, Mrs Okon, rather than help Clara achieve freedom from marginalisation, displays a sense of even deeper confusion herself and only lends her friend a hand in her near destruction. Salami's Cheryl, on the other hand, becomes very instrumental to Sosa's eventual triumph over the marginalisation she has suffered.

Binebai (n.d) says "For *Sweet Revenge*, the revolt becomes even more interesting as both African women and their European counterparts speak in one accord and act to emancipate the African woman to bring down male hegemony" (154) While Sofola sees western influence as a deterrent to the African woman's struggle against marginalisation, Salami sees it as a potent tool towards the realisation of the desired freedom.

**Resolution of Conflict:** in the final analysis, Sofola's female protagonist realises her mistake and retraces her step, but it is Salami's male protagonist who realises his mistake instead, and retraces his step. However, to justify she is a radical feminist, Salami does not allow her female protagonist to accept her man as truly remorseful and forgive him, while Sofola justifies she is a liberal feminist by allowing her male protagonist to truly forgive his woman and accept her apology as genuine.



Zulu Sofola employs tradition to resolve conflict and restore the family while Salami employs modernity to resolve conflict, leaving the family separated. This suggests the radical feminist position that marriage itself is a patriarchal institution designed to marginalise the woman. While Zulu Sofola sees the home as the ultimate and a good reason for the woman to bury her ego and let the man have the final say, Salami thinks the woman ought to pride her freedom above the design of a marriage.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the foregoing, Irene Salami has left almost no stone unturned to identify herself with the radical feminist movement, providing us with enough justification for her ideological preference even though it is a clear deviation from feminism as it was introduced to the Nigerian dramatic scene by Zulu Sofola. However, we can evidently say that the changing realities that are ever constant, like the high rate of female literacy and the participation of women in politics, have played an important role in this deviation.

Binebai (n.d) in appraisal of Salami's Feminist stance says:

consequently, Irene Salami's drama which presents itself as a fundamental and pragmatic voice from the margin celebrates radical feminism, a philosophy which emphasises the patriarchal pedigree of discrimination between men and women, particularly, social and cultural dominance of women by men (160).

She further says conclusively that "There is no gain saying that Sweet Revenge radically responds to the marginalisation of the African woman in a chauvinistic society which privileges patriarchy to downgrade womanhood" (160)

The evident radicalism in Salami's approach to feminism has therefore enabled us to observe the sharp contrast between her feminist ideology and that of her predecessor, Zulu Sofola. This contrast has been the concern of this paper, drawing from the backgrounds of the playwrights, their styles, their themes, as well as the significances of their characterisation to make inferences. It is from these and reviews of relevant scholarships that this paper is able to establish Zulu Sofola's Feminist ideology as liberal, and Irene Salami's as radical

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