My work is larger than any female-centred ideology- Prof Onwueme

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By McPhilips Nwachukwu & Nwagbo Nneyelike

Professor Tess Onwueme is one of Africa’s foremost female playwrights and a Distinguished Professor of Cultural Diversity and English at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, USA. The playwright, who has not only published severally, but is so globally studied was recently honoured with a new appointment as her university’s Professor of Global Letters.

An honour reserved for the most accomplished academics, the full-time tenured appointment was recently given to her in recognition of her “increasing prominence in the field of contemporary playwrights,” and comes with “a new contract and new duties” consistent with the high profile of the appointment.

In appointing Professor Tess Onwueme to this exalted platform, Dr. Patricia Kleine, Vice-Chancellor and Provost of the University of Wisconsin noted in a letter to the author of over a dozen award-winning plays: “You bring honor to the University of Wisconsin. It is only fitting that the university recognises your extraordinary talent.”

From left, Prof. Tess Onwueme, Prof. Wole Soyinka and Prof. A. Porter (Drexel University) in Vermont at the Ala international Convention where Prof. Onwueme was awarded the Fonlon-Nichols award.

Onwueme has received many international awards, including the African Literature Association’s prestigious Fonlon-Nichols award in 2009. The award is given annually to a black writer whose works have demonstrated a commitment to democratic ideals, humanistic values and literary excellence in writing. She was also in 2007, appointed to the US State Department Public Diplomacy Specialist/Speaker Program for North, West, and East India.

In this interview with Sunday Vanguard Arts, the Delta State-born and American-based playwright-cum-scholar drives the reader into the theatrical spirit of her art.
Given your creative writing efforts as a known female dramatist in Nigeria, who propogates female-centered ideology, would you say that women centered drama is achieving the purpose of creating identity for the women?

Let me say right away that I am partial to the experiences, concerns, struggles, and challenges of women, the teeming powerless youths, challenged by the "poly-tricks" of oil and globalisation and unemployment and poverty, along with the nagging matters of (dis)connections between Africa and her Diaspora, the grossly (ab)used Earth, our Environment and (Mother)land; like our own Nigerian Niger-Delta! All these colour and temper the texture of my work.

And, so who is afraid of ideology, if I may I ask?

For I must say that I’m quite tickled by your curious caption of “Ideology”: specifically your branding of the “female centered ideology.” Is it a demonic disease? Because it’s rooted in the female?

Frankly, in one hand, that impassioned framing of it makes it sound like some form of influenza, rabid pestilence, or even a WMD (Weapon of Mass Destruction), which terrorises healthy people (male, I suppose!), and therefore must be exterminated.

On the other hand, it also sounds much like putting on a "designer suit" by someone in a binge to make a fashion statement, because it is a fad or vogue. And, I’m not so sure that I fit into that chic designer suit or straightjacket: as it is. For I’m larger and my writing is even more complex and larger than me.


The rich textual evidence is there in the evolving topographies of my work to defy any such labeling and pigeonholing and boxing into (to) one corner as simply “female centered ideology.”

Since the seventies when I adopted the pen as a most reliable friend that can help me interrogate and discover truths as I took to writing, what has evolved is a thick tapestry of knowledge and ideas/ideologies woven with the variegated yarns and patterns of my interpreting contemporary life’s experiences as they are marked by the growing challenges of gender, ethnicity, class inequality and poverty impacting the (global) underclass women and youths, especially and aggravated by the (un)holy wars and the "poly-tricks" of religion, faith, and ideology that’s fast corrupting and polluting on our land and environment.

All these colourings and strands of my work were woven into a representative thematic fabric in: ""Staging Women, Youth, Globalization, and Eco-Literature in Onwueme’s Work,"" by the respected scholars who convened the 2009 Tess International Conference exclusively devoted to my work, following the award of the Fonlon-Nichols award to me in that year.

What is ideology

And, that leads me now to what we mean by Ideology: what is it, really? Ideology stems from Ideas. The basic ingredient of an ideology is an idea, a value, a principle, the essential nectar of knowledge coding, informing, shaping, a cause of action. Ideas/ideologies do vary: some are healthy and nurturing; others are malignant and toxic.

As a promising student of life, and one writing and teaching life, I’ve since committed to deploying my own creative talent and scholarship in awakening and producing consciousness, textured and tempered my own unique experiences as a Nigerian woman, mother of five children, and a growing global citizen. As a woman, I can see life, better, and more focused, from the vantage point as a woman; and not a man. For I cannot be a man. As a woman, I see life more clearly from that female prism.

As such, I cannot but take sides and be on the side saner of ideas to help construct ideas/ideologies that nurture, grow, and advance my local and global community. These nourishing ideas/ideologies that have chosen and possessed me for the past three decades.

Just like the writing that has chosen me to embody those same ideas that empower me to be a ‘carrier’ of groomed healthy seed for growth that is not just exclusive to man or woman, but mutually to both. I can only cultivate ideas/ideologies that breathe new life to our challenged and charged world of conflicts today. I cannot stand still, glued to one spot and stranded by one label. Life’s affairs are dynamic and I just have to keep moving, to see and appreciate and interpret it in all its contradictions and complexities.

In all, one central ideology appears to unify my creative consciousness and sensibility: the recurring theme of the Connectedness of people—human connectedness: between male and female, between races white and black.

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