Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora*: *An African Doll's House* as a Paradigm

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Abstract In theorizing adaptation, revisions and or translations, scholars have always been of the opinion that every adaptation or translation is an original in its own authentic sense. It is on that basis that we see adaptations as serving as a bridge between two cultures. Ibsen's works as universal masterpieces lend themselves to re-visions and reinterpretations across cultural lines, for the themes of his works have always revolved around "the struggle for integrity; the conflict between duty to oneself and duty to others." One playwright who finds parallels in Ibsen's works that can be interrogated for cross-cultural dialogue is Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, an up-and-coming Nigerian playwright. Utoh-Ezeajugh's adaptation of *A Doll's House* into *Nneora*: *an African Doll's House* is here examined to discover the extent to which it has served to expose uniformities between Scandinavia of Ibsen's day and the Africa (Nigeria) of Utoh-Ezeajugh's day.

Key words *A Doll's House*; *Nneora*; adaptation

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Any discussion on world drama and theatre without a place for Norwegian iconoclast and playwright, Henrik Ibsen, is definitely, skewed. This is because, at a time when playwrights were content to see drama as a medium for mere titillation of the senses, Ibsen revolted against the norm by making drama relevant to the moral edification of his society. The many influences which Ibsen exerted and continues to exert on succeeding generations of playwrights are eloquent testimonies of the timelessness of his thematic preoccupations.

In discussing Ibsen's creative oeuvre, one must of necessity, notice that his themes command universal application; hence his works appeal to people of all cultures and climes. Thus, Prentice Hall explains:

> Not only was he the creator of the modern realistic prose drama, but he also was one of the first writers to make drama a vehicle for social comment... because of his boldness, his innovativeness, and his extraordinary talent, Ibsen is now widely regarded as the greatest and most influential dramatist of the nineteenth

century. (Prentice Hall 967)

The fact that Ibsen's works has been transposed, revised, translated and often adapted in many places all over the globe, proves Ibsen's place as one of the most important figures in world drama.

Since profound and relevant arts thrives best in open vision, Ibsen's success as a playwright and innovator can best be measured from the variety of critical attention which his works have continued to receive. Concerning this openness of vision and form in Ibsen's works, Chamberlain says

> that even when a prescriptive ideological or metaphysical element seemsdominant, it is suffused with doubts of the most fundamental, though never utterly destructive kinds; that the mock-heroic indications are almost invariably as powerful as the heroic; and that Ibsen's... themes are constantly establishedin contexts of ironic appraisal. (1 – 2)

Here lies the secret to Ibsen's success—a penchant for all to see points or views to identify with at all times. This is also what makes Ibsen's works an adapter's delight since his themes command universal application.

I. The Practice of Adaptation

From the beginning of time, the inclination to adapt, remold, reshape, or remodel other people's ideas has remained one of man's most enduring attributes. Man is thus succinctly put, a recycler of ideas who instinctively perceives in other people's works that which can be used to further his or her own cause. This innate attribute of humanity, it can even be argued, has been responsible for humanity's various developments in different fields. In the artistic and literary world, this trait has remained most ubiquitous. Indeed, not even the greatest book of all times— Holy Bible is free of from this trait. Thus, the bible story of Noah's flood is said to have been adapted from the Babylonian national epic, The Gilgamesh Epic, said to have been in existence long before the Bible was written. [1]

The practice of adaptation from the Greek theatre, which borrowed extensively from the Egyptian theatre, is to say the least, necessary for the healthy growth of world literature. In today's world writers are not just adapting but inter-textualizing, revising and re-visioning. Adaptation usually appeals to writers or dramaturges' desire to explore the timelessness in a work of literature and interrogate those attributes in such a work that commands universal appeal. This is why it will be safe to say that literature does not develop in a linear progression but in a cyclical manner.

In spite of the fact that adaptation as a literary tradition has come to stay, some people still feel that it is a lazy way of surviving an intellectually fastidious society. [2] This view however, is not without equivocations as some scholars have insisted that

> There is something to be translated or transposed to satisfy the need and taste of a new generation or a new social climate... the inevitability of translationbe-

> comes apparent because of what is referred to as the concomitant necessity of each generation to remake its canonical text. (Bamidele 38)

Adaptation is thus a necessary practice of humanity in their attempt to rediscover themselves through examining the past for lessons that could prove beneficial to the present generation. Adaptations should therefore not be engaged in for "the mere sake of translation but to cast a bridge between two cultures" (Udrescu 75).

However, even though adaptation or translation is accepted as a thriving literary tradition, one is tempted to ask how creative or original an endeavor it is. Chinweizu however, believes that the question is in bad taste as he asks:

> Didn't Shakespeare base his historical plays on Holinshed? Did he declare so in his manuscripts? Does that make him a plagiarist? Didn't Brecht lift ideas and texts from other plays and adapt them to his own purposes? Isn't that a legitimate creative activity? Does that make him any less original? (Chinweizu 53)

Chinweizu's propositions call for deep reflection but Bamidele holds the view that

> there should be a creative need to translate or transpose a work of art and such a need reminds us that all differences between original and versions are inexorably reciprocal. A creative need for any literary... piece so translated or transposed becomes in the effort of the translator an original re-definition of the earlier text in terms of the modernist moment of the respective language of the remake. (Bamidele 38)

Bamidele's rationalizations appear to be saying that the issue of originality and or creativity is trivial and should therefore not arise since differences between the original and so called versions are reciprocal. This is why adaptations assist in the healthy growth of world literature. What should concern us as theorists and critics should therefore be efforts geared towards discovering "ways in which a particular writer/translator absorbs a tradition and from it, develops his own authentic (individual) voice" (Bamidele 38). It is on this premise that we analyze Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's reworking and re-visioning of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* into *Nneora: an African Doll's House* to discover how the work has been able to cast a bridge between the African and Scandinavian cultures.

In *A Doll's House*, Nora comes in from Christmas shopping and her husband Torvald Helmer showers her with pet names all the while insinuating that she's a scatter brained spendthrift and therefore not capable of taking care of herself. Next, Nils Krogstad comes in to see Helmer and we sense the tension and resentment in Nora. As Krogstad goes in to Helmer, Dr. Rank comes out and gets introduced to Mrs. Kristine Linde. Helmer comes out at this juncture and is prevailed upon to offer a job to Kristine even as he leaves in the company of Dr. Rank and Kristine. Krogstad makes good his threat by dropping a letter revealing his dealings with Nora for Helmer. As Helmer reads the letter and abuses Nora, Krogstad's apology letter contai-

ning the blackmail document is delivered. With this, the Helmers are saved but Nora learns a bitter lesson from the entire ordeal. She decides that duty to oneself should supersede duty to others, especially when those others have been selfish and mean. She thus resolves to leave her matrimonial home in search of self fulfillment. As Helmer pleads with her to stay, she goes out and just when a ray of hope enters Helmer's eyes, we hear the door slam shut.

In *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, Nneora comes to the aid of an unemployed young graduate, Ikenna by paying his debts and promising to help secure him a job through her benefactor and lover Osita. Next, she goes to Osita and deceives him into believing that Ikenna is her cousin; hence Osita promises to fix him up. Years later when we see Ikenna and Nneora, Nneora is heavily pregnant and from conversations, we learn that that she already has four girls. We also learn that Ikenna had a major operation two years ago; that the Bank sponsored it through Nneora's intervention and that Ikenna is definitely less than happy and satisfied with the fact that Nneora has only given birth to girls so far. Before the scene ends, a strange phone call informs Ikenna that a letter containing important revelations about someone close to him is in his office drawer.

Nneora's parley with Dr. Frank reveals that she's carrying a set of male twins even as we notice that she's distracted over the impending revelation through the letter. While watching a maiden dance across the street, Nneora runs into her old classmate and friend, Linda. They go to Nneora's house and while they were interacting, Linda reveals her ordeals in the hands of her estranged husband, Osita. She equally informs Nneora that she's in town in search of husband who from all indications is a changed man. Nneora also tells her own story. According to her, the man who has been her lover and benefactor before she met Ikenna, who helped get a job for Ikenna; who also approved Ikenna's treatment abroad on the bank's bill, is still insisting on a last date with her. That man, Osita Nonso, had given her up till yesterday to fulfill her promise of a date or he will reveal the whole affair to Ikenna. Linda here learns to her horror that Osita Nonso, the husband she is returning to is the same heartless man about to break up Nneora's marriage as she storms out in confusion. Osita comes to Nneora's house to remind her that her time is up and that he is determined to follow through with his threats. At the Bank's end of year party, Ikenna goes up to his office to pick up the all important letter, but before he could open it, Nneora distracts him by feigning labour pains.

Back home, Ikenna after reading the letter throws tantrums calling Nneora names and describing her as unfit for the marriage institution. In the midst of his tantrums, Linda enters with a repentant Osita and Osita apologizes for his behavior, revealing that he was eaten up by envy and that Nneora has remained a faithful wife to Ikenna. Linda also reveals that Nneora is carrying a set of male twins as they take their leave. Ikenna realizing that his position, moral and social status is no longer being threatened decides to forgive Nneora. Nneora however, declares herself unwilling to continue staying in the same house and union with Ikenna, especially since Ikenna has proved himself unworthy of her love. Ikenna tries to reason with her, but resolves to henceforth look out for herself. According to her, it will take a miracle for her to stay

back. With that, she goes into the room, ostensibly to pack her things even as a glimmer of hope comes into Ikenna's eyes.

II. Africanizing *A Doll's House*

Societies have different cultures but sometimes, certain similarities exist. These similarities make it possible for one interrogating certain cultural variables to generalize on some issues. In investigating the practice of adaptation, the most necessary step to take is to "discover ways in which a particular writer absorbs a tradition and from it, develops his own authentic voice" (Bamidele 38). In analyzing Utoh-Ezeajugh's efforts therefore, certain parameters must of necessity, guide our investigation. These parameters as I have said elsewhere will include "moral, social, political and cultural considerations" (Asigbo 104). In setting out, one would first of all, observe that the Scandinavian society of the middle and late nineteenth century has a lot in common with the Nigerian and indeed, African society of the middle and late twentieth century. These areas of socio-cultural contiguity will include—the place of women in the scheme of things; societal expectations of and on the marriage institution as well as a man's place and responsibility to his family.

African society of the twentieth century saw the woman's place as predominantly revolving around housekeeping as well as rearing children. Reaffirming this, Evwierhoma says: "In several of these cultures, despite the change impacted on her by modernization, the woman is still largely marginalized. Although her image may be salutary and dignified, roles ascribed to her centre around those of housekeeping and mothering" (1). Ibsen's Norway of the late nineteenth century betrays some similarities with Utoh-Ezeajugh's Africa especially as it concerns the pecuniary perception of the woman. Also, in both societies, the institution of marriage is seen as sacred, even though, ironically, it is always the woman who has to go the extra mile to keep it from breaking up. In these societies, the woman is seen merely as a wet nurse and pleasure-giver to the man who sees himself as the only one intellectually endowed to think and act on behalf of the family. We thus notice that Helmer considers Nora as incapable of serious intellectual exertion but rather sees her as a play thing and an object of entertainment. She is thus either his "... little lark twittering" or his "... squirrel rummaging around" (43-44). Helmer's entire attitude toward Nora has always been patronizing as can be gleaned from the following lines: "You're an odd little one... You're never at a loss for scaring up money; but the moment you have it, it runs right through your fingers; you never know what you've done with it. Well, one takes you as you are. It's deep in your blood" (46). This masculinist attitude as exhibited by Helmer is, sadly enough, a common index of the Norway of Ibsen's day even as it is still largely prevalent in today's Africa. To the typical African male, a woman's place is in the kitchen; hence any claim to intelligence which the woman makes, must be in culinary matters. This chauvinistic attitude, we dare say, was even observed in Europe of the nineteenth century as was alluded to by no less a person than Fredrick Nietzsche when he opined that there's something inherently masculine in any woman that displays unusual intelligence.

Since attitudes change, it is not surprising that today's Europe has become so

woman-friendly that women can now aspire to the highest political offices. This can be evidenced from the fact that also consider Angela Uerkel, current Chancellor of Germany occupied the highest political office in Britain for many years. It equally goes to show that there is a ray of hope for the African women as they are becoming more and more involved the act of governance. The case of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, current President of Liberia, is a vindication of the fact that today in Africa; women are no longer seen as second-class citizens but as equal partners in the development agenda of many African nations.

III. Adaptive Techniques

A reading of Utoh-Ezeajugh's play will reveal a work carefully crafted to serve as a bridge between two cultures. First, she was able to take the heroine's name (Nora) in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and turn it into an eponymous heroine in the African version. The remarkable thing is that Nneora, (Nora) literally translated as "Mother of all" still retains all the feminine virtues exhibited by Nora and has indeed been described as "an embodiment of all that is virtuous in the quintessential woman... submissive without being slavish, assertive without being pugnacious" (Asigbo 269). Utoh-Ezeajugh's astuteness in being able to turn what one might regard as universal attributes of womanhood into virtues that can be regarded as uniquely African, is worthy of commendation. Nneora therefore, both in name and indeed, remains the perfect mother figure—self sacrificing, unobtrusive as well as altruistic.

Also one notices that the playwright, through subtle use of innuendo highlights two central tenets of African life, namely the supremacy of the male child and the sometime untealthy influence of the African extended family. One thus notices that Ikenna's behavior changed for the worse immediately after his uncle's visit. What this goes to show is that most of the human dimension tensions experienced in most African families, will most of the time, be traced to influences exerted from without by members of the extended family. In *Nneora* for instance, the playwright goes to great lengths to prove that in the African world, female children are regarded with disdain. Indeed, complaining about this, Nneora says: "That was what I thought until six months ago, when your uncle paid us a visit. I donot know what you two discussed, but I know that since then, your behavior towards our children has never been the same again" (37).

When finally, Ikenna couldn't hide his feelings again, he bursts out saying: "Do not tell me you are going to give birth to girls again, oh no... what have I done to deserve this kind of stigma?" (102). As callous as the above excerpts appear, they truly reflect the typical African male's attitude to the presence of only female children in the family. To the African male, a man must have male children to keep his name alive and continue the family tree.

Socio-politically, one observes that Utoh-Ezeajugh's reworking of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* remains relevant not only because it updates and reflects the social reality of the African socio-political history, and in doing that, eliminates the cultivation of elitism, but also because it is able in the words of Achebe to "seek the things that belong to its peace... speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its his-

tory, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people" (16). There is no gainsaying the fact that the African society of today is still very much encumbered by gender inequality. This is occasioned by the presence of various cultural practices that tend to oppress and marginalize women. Indeed, right from the last quarter of the twentieth century—precisely in 1975, when the United Nations Organization declared the first International Women's day and decade, to the Beijing Conference of 1995, various women and non-governmental groups have been involved in various forms of advocacy, all aimed at improving the lot of women in the scheme of things.

In tackling the feminist question therefore, Utoh-Ezeajugh shows herself to be acutely aware of the social realities of her immediate society; a society characterized by the most tenacious, vicious and oppressive form of repression against women; a society, in which in the words of Linda in *Nneora*, "men gang up to steal everything that belongs to us, including our God-given right of existence. And you know what bothers me most? For centuries, we women have silently endorsed this social gang-up" (71).

In speaking out against the marginalization of women therefore, the playwright does not, like her Western counterpart, endorse Feminism wholesale, but instead pitches tent with some of her African foremothers; people in the ilk of late Zulu Sofola, who advocated an African version of feminism or what is generally referred to as Womanism or Motherism.

The intrinsic difference between Feminism and Womanism or Motherism can be found subtly buried in Nora's attitude towards her children as against that displayed by Linda and Nneora towards their own children. Beyond the fact of renting a nurse maid to take care of the Helmer children, one notices that Nora, in spite of all her other feminine virtues cannot qualify as an ideal mother since she did not think twice about abandoning her children in her quest for freedom and self-fulfillment. This is diametrically opposed to the actions of Linda who made sure to leave with her children and of course, that of Nneora, who insisted on bringing up her children herself. Herein rests the basic ideological difference between Western feminism and African Motherism or womanism. While to the feminists, child bearing and rearing can be sacrificed on the altar of ideology, to the motherist or womanist, being motherly and womanly cannot be compromised for ideological leanings. The African woman therefore, even as she fights against all forms of discrimination based on gender considerations, sees herself in the archetypal role of "Mother Africa", nourishing and taking care of her children. She would therefore rather die than think of leaving her child behind.

Gender relations as a site of conflict, have produced a rich corpus of both creative and critical literature. Many people however, appear to be agreed on the fact that the female gender is marginalized even though certain other scholars maintain that it is the woman who does the most unobtrusive kind of marginalizing and hegemony.[3] Without pitching our tent for or against the feminists, one can safely say that what Utoh-Ezeajugh advocates is a symbiotic relationship anchored on mutual love and respect between the sexes. To Utoh-Ezeajugh, marriages in which the woman functions as the man's possession are not worth the name and should be opted out of by any woman with any sense of self worth. In the words of Nneora: "I will no longer force myself to stay in an institution which takes everything a woman has to offer and gives

nothing in return" (120 – 121).

On the level of crafting and ideology, however, a marked difference exists between Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora*. Of course, the dance exhibition and Bank end of year party are Utoh-Ezeajugh's way of Africanizing a Scandinavian story through portraying the African gregarious nature and love for communal living through partying and group socialization. In Ibsen's play, true to European love for individual living, the party held at the Helmers is a private affair involving only close friends of the family. Ideologically, Ibsen's work betrays relative pessimism when compared to its African version which harbors a measure of optimism for the family as a unit of existence. Ibsen's relative pessimism stems from Nora's final act, the door slam, which shattered the status quo and marked the end of patriarchal hegemony in European orthodox thinking. For the feminists however, the slammed door marked the liberation of women from archetypal inhibitions and propelled them into the mainstream of socio-political life. Torvald Helmer's shock and disbelief as he watched his once docile wife Nora walk away into the night and slam the behind her, can be likened to what Ibsen's audience must have felt as they watched the torpedoing of everything they had been brought up to believe about the family and role divisions between the sexes in it.

The African version on the other hand, holds up a measure of hope for a new kind of union anchored on real love, understanding and mutual respect for each other. By not slamming the door, and by allowing Ikenna to see a ray of hope in his attempt to pacify his estranged wife, Utoh-Ezeajugh seems to be telling us that when all is said and done, what the men need is re-education and some measure of assertiveness, to shock them out of their selfish and egotistical tendencies. Indeed, by saying that she (Nneora) would bring up her children to know what real love means and entails (124), the playwright is more or less saying that a new breed of human beings will emerge, one that is unblemished by pretences to male superiority and that shares a belief in the equality of the sexes. This new breed willingly supports fellow members in trying moments, and in time, will emerge to take the place of the present generation.

Finally, one will observe that Utoh-Ezeajugh's attempt at reworking a Scandinavian story is from all indications, a successful one. She has been able, not only to update Ibsen's play in line with current realities, but also to cast a bridge between the Scandinavian and African cultures, through portraying areas of cultural contiguity. Where Ibsen closed the door on filial understanding and forgiveness, she gives us another chance at trying to make it right. Above all, she raises our hope in the possibility of a future where true love will reign supreme.

Acutely aware of the subtle differences existing between the Scandinavian and African culture, Utoh-Ezeajugh explores the theme of marital infidelity as the reason for the schism which the Ikennas experienced. Keeping to Ibsen's original of making Nora borrow from Krogstad would not have been a serious issue for conflict in a typical African setting. As a playwright acutely aware of these cultural peculiarities, she explores an area that remains controversial in most African societies of today. This singular touch of local color gives Utoh-Ezeajugh's work a voice of its own.

【Notes】

1. See "The Gilgamesh Epic" in Prentice Hall Literature's *World Masterpieces*. Gilgamesh, the Babylonian national epic, tells the story of the eponymous hero's titanic wisdom in saving his world from flood by building a big boat.

2. Conversations with Dr. Emma Emeasalu on November 9, 2008 at Port Harcourt.

3. See for instance, Chinweizu's *The Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1990). There, Chinweizu endeavored to prove that women possess the most subtle means of controlling the male folk.

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