

NNEORA: AN AFRICAN DOLL'S HOUSE:

A STUDY OF THE VIRTUES OF WOMANHOOD

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172 INTRODUCTION

Adaptations of European plays to the African context are fairly common. Ancient Greek, Shakespearean, and twentieth century European plays have been particular favourites of post-colonial African playwrights.¹ The reasons for this are varied, one of which has been a desire to make these well known European plays accessible to African audiences in a post-colonial context in a way they can fully appreciate. While some of these adaptations are fairly faithful to the original texts, many of them undergo such great cultural transformations that they may be regarded more as transcreations. Transcreation is a term used in post-colonial discourse to denote works which have been translated from one language and culture into another and assume a significantly new quality (Ewbank 2004, Wright 2006, Balme 1999). In this paper I discuss one such transcreation of Henrik Ibsen's late 19th century play, *A Doll's House*, into a 21st century Nigerian play, *Nneora: An African Doll's House* by Tracie Chimo Utoh-Ezeajugh. That Ibsen's play and his unforgettable Nora have translated so well into a relevant Nigerian play with clearly identifiable perspectives and parallel themes is a mark of Ibsen's mastery and understanding of human character; which, it may be argued, forms the basis of the possibilities of such transcreations. It is the human element, which is universally recognisable, that makes it possible for a play written centuries earlier to have abiding relevance when translated into another culture in another time. Rochelle Wright points to this fact when she notes, in discussing some transcreations of Ibsen's plays in Iran and India that in his plays 'neither the subject matter nor the psychology of the characters is specific to that time and place...present-day audiences (therefore) recognize the broader issues addressed even when the specific circumstances no longer apply' (2006, 1). In this article I com-

pare Utoh-Ezeajugh's text with the original and discuss the points of difference and the cultural determinants of these differences and how it may be read as an African feminist play.

Besides an expansion of Ibsen's text, to give her version the necessary Nigerian context, Utoh-Ezeajugh's eponymous heroine Nneora is also greatly transformed compared to Ibsen's Nora. This transformation, beginning with her name, Nneora, which translates as 'mother of all', to her characterisation as a strong industrious woman not at all as helpless and naïve as Nora may be read, I argue is as a result of African conceptions of feminism and womanhood. African feminism, like all other contemporary theoretical conceptions on the continent, is conditioned by the social and cultural matrix. What African women see as priorities in their fight for equal rights are not always the same as what Euro-American feminists would consider as priorities. For example, Mikell (1989) notes that

the reference points for Western feminists and African women activists have been totally different, because Western women were emphasising individual female autonomy, while African women have been emphasizing culturally linked forms of public participation. (4)

173

Utoh-Ezeajugh thus brings her uniquely African perspectives of feminism to Ibsen's play.

While the initial reception of Ibsen's play was met by a controversy as to whether his play was really about 'the woman question',² there is no doubt whatsoever about Utoh-Ezeajugh's text. It is in every way about 'the woman question', exploring as it does, the relationship between men and women in a marriage context and how women, despite their contributions, may often be regarded as subservient to men. Utoh-Ezeajugh's handling of Nneora and her friend Linda shows the strength and fortitude of African women in the face of the most dehumanising treatment. Utoh-Ezeajugh also demonstrates how African women take pride in their role as mothers without sacrificing their autonomy and agency. To be a woman is to be a mother. In the African context this is not necessarily a limitation.³ Nneora is proudly 'mother of all'. Alex Asigbo, in discussing Utoh-Ezeajugh's work, notes that she brings a new dimension to Nigerian feminism by rejecting the mere sloganeering of feminist mantra by focusing on women themselves, calling on them "not to forget their feminine virtues but to see themselves as mothers of the world" (270). While agreeing with his observation that this dynamic female playwright does not stop at mere platitudes of feminism, I argue that he misses her point by focussing on those elements in the play which appear to support the view that her brand of feminism fits neatly within the social norms of what constitutes a virtuous woman; one who is subservient to her husband and asserts herself only in non pugnacious ways.

THE PLAY *NNEORA: AN AFRICAN DOLL'S HOUSE*

The play is arranged in Parts and Situations rather than in Acts and Scenes. There are five situations in the first part and four in the second. The first two situations in the play have no direct correspondence with Ibsen's play and introduce characters and circumstances which are different. The play opens with some masquerades in a market, seeking to charm the market women with their dances and antics for money. Mama Uduak, one of the market women, selling food items set out on a table, will have none of it and sends them away. Her neighbour, Nneora, who owns a shop selling different designs of cloth is more sympathetic and admonishes Mama Uduak, "...leave them now, it is Christmas season, that is how it is normally done" (2). Thus, like the Norwegian play, it opens at Christmas, but the expressions of Christmas are clearly different in this new context.

174 Soon a young man Ikenna (Ibsen's Torvald) comes to see Mama Uduak to ask for some food items on credit. It turns out he is a regular customer who had previously bought food on credit to the tune of seven hundred and eighty niara⁵ and had not been able to pay. Mama Uduak insists on collecting all her money despite the young man's pleas for mercy and consideration. He is a graduate of one of the country's universities but has failed to find a job. He is, however, very hopeful of finding one soon, he explains. Mama Uduak had had enough of this talk and was not accepting any more excuses. Nneora takes pity on him and pays off his debt and gives him money to buy some food. She finds out from him that he was actually a qualified lawyer but because he did not know any 'big man' who could help him to get a job, he had remained jobless despite the hundreds of applications he had sent to different companies. Nneora, as she later confesses, is rather taken with Ikenna at this point and so offers to help him to find a job. The Nigerian context is thus firmly established early in the play with hints at the economic and social conditions prevailing in that country. It is Nneora who initiates a relationship with Ikenna by coming to his rescue; she is in a position of power, while he is entirely powerless.

In the next situation, Nneora keeps her promise and goes to see her friend Osita (Ibsen's Krogstad) who is a bank manager. She asks him to help Ikenna find a job, under the pretext that he was her relative. It soon becomes clear that Nneora and Osita are in an amorous relationship and that he would like to marry Nneora. She is reluctant because he has a wife, who, although now estranged from her husband, Nneora suspects might one day come back to him. Osita is infuriated by her stance, but is too enamoured with her to refuse her request. In this instance also, Nneora is the one in charge although she is seeking favours from Osita.

The third situation takes us nine years into the future to the point where Ibsen's play starts, but with some significant changes in the circumstances. Nneora and Ikenna have been married for eight years. It is Christmas eve. Ikenna arrives at home from his job at the bank and finds a man's pair of shoes hidden under the settee. It appears 'as if a man is hiding under the settee with his legs protruding out' (28). He

yanks the shoes 'off,' and falls backwards revealing nothing but a pair of shoes. He shouts for his wife who appears from the kitchen heavily pregnant. Nneora explains that she had bought the shoes as a Christmas present for him and was disappointed that he had found them so easily where she had hidden them. It is clear at this point that Ikenna is highly insecure and does not fully trust his wife, but he manages to cover up his awkward suspicions. As in Ibsen's play, Ikenna has been promoted with prospects of more money soon. And Nneora, like Nora, wants to be able to spend more money on presents, but Ikenna, like Torvald, chides her and calls her a 'typical woman'.

Ikenna is presented as extremely possessive and quite chauvinistic, as is evident in the following exchanges:

Nneora (going behind him and massaging his neck): You really look tired. Did you have a very busy day?

Ikenna: I was saddled with a very difficult client the whole day. I barely managed to shake him off some ten minutes ago.

Nneora: Oh poor you. I know how you must be feeling, I used to have some difficult customers too when I still owned my shop.

Ikenna: Your shop! There you go again Nneora. How can you compare a shack in the market with my executive position in a merchant bank?

Nneora (feeling hurt): It may have been a shack but I owned it...

Ikenna: And now I own you. You are solely mine; shop, body and soul. So honey, why are we arguing about something that belongs to me?

This situation reveals a reversal of power. Nneora apparently has relinquished her position of power to her husband. Whereas she had been the one to get him a job and get him started in his career, he is now the man of the house, the bread winner, the one who decides how the family's money should be spent. He is the one whose wishes must be paramount. If she is to get her way, she must carefully negotiate with him. His disdain for her shop is a strategy to remind her of her new position of subordination. His superiority by virtue of his education and his 'executive position in a merchant bank' must be asserted to remind Nneora of her new inferior status, lest she forget. His insecurity due to the memory of his earlier position of powerlessness translates into his domineering and possessive attitude. He has, we discover, stopped his wife from working in her shop. She had in fact sold her shop two years into their marriage to help pay for his medical treatment abroad. She had also been instrumental in getting someone in the bank to sign documents which allowed the release of money he needed for this treatment, corresponding directly with Nora's actions to save Torvald in similar circumstances. In this case, however, there is no forgery involved, but rather, as Nneora reveals later, a promise of sexual favours. Speaking with the playwright about this, she indicated how a forgery in the Nigerian context would not be considered as grave a crime deserving such social sanctions as feared in Ibsen's context. She had to think of something which would warrant a husband's fury

and society's condemnation. Infidelity, she decided was the most appropriate 'crime' (personal communication with the playwright, June 2008).

This situation further reveals points of potential trouble in their marriage. They have four daughters, who are a nuisance to Ikenna and he makes no effort to hide it. He prefers to have them away with relatives, because they make too much noise and disturb him when he wants to work at home. It is also clear that he wishes that the child his wife is now expecting will be a boy. It is apparent that they probably have had so many children because of his desire for a male child. This preference for sons is very much a reality in Nigerian and other African societies. During this situation also, Ikenna gets a strange phone call from someone who refuses to mention his name about a letter he had deposited in his office (home letter boxes are non-existent in Nigeria) which contained information about someone close to him. Nneora is alarmed, knowing very well who the call was from. Ikenna would have left immediately to pick up the letter but she convinces him to wait till the next evening (a Saturday) when they were to go for the bank's Christmas party. The situation ends with Nneora in a state close to panic.

In the next situation, Nneora goes to see their family doctor, Dr. Frank, obviously Dr. Rank's counterpart, but there is no suggestion of anything but mutual respect between them. To have followed the source text in suggesting a hint of romance between the two would have painted Nneora as quite a promiscuous woman, having established her previous relationship with Osita. It would also have rendered her rather less dignified than the playwright seeks to present her. He tells her the ultrasound showed she was expecting twin sons. The importance of his role in the play perhaps lies entirely in this revelation. The fact of the expected sons is important in the play, a piece of information Nneora keeps from her husband till the very last moments of the drama.

Linda (Mrs. Linde in Ibsen), an old school friend of Nneora's, is introduced in the next situation. They meet quite by chance on the street as Nneora makes her way home from the hospital. Again Utoh-Ezeajugh takes the opportunity to infuse the play with some Nigerian flavour with young people dancing on the street in colourful costumes. Mama Uduak is among the crowd watching the dancers which includes her daughter. She and Nneora reminisce about their old times in the market, with Mama Uduak accusing Nneora of having become too big and important to associate with her old friends any more. As they watch the dancers, Nneora notices a familiar face, which turns out to be her old friend Linda. The situation closes with them talking excitedly as they go to Nneora's house.

Utoh-Ezeajugh introduces all the characters in the play by the end of the first part. The additional characters add a distinctively Nigerian flavour. Mama Uduak has no direct correlation in Ibsen's text and is the only character that uses Pidgin English, a common lingua franca of many non-educated people from the many different language groups in Nigeria. The masquerades and dancers are also absent in the source text. They, apart from adding some spectacle and providing the opportunity for some

Nigerian music and dance in the play, are the only link to Nora's fancy dress and tarantella dance.

The second part opens with Linda and Nneora catching up on each other's lives. The playwright makes use of two flashbacks in this situation to avoid lengthy narrations. Linda had dropped out of school as a result of getting pregnant. Her family made her marry the man responsible for the pregnancy. Initially they had a wonderful marriage, but as he progressed in his career, he began to maltreat her, bringing home other women in flagrant disregard for her feelings. Things deteriorated to the point where he physically abused her and called her 'a dirty illiterate' woman. Stung by this insult, she enrolled in evening school, passed all the requisite exams in order to enter the university and study law. On graduation she left her husband, taking her children with her to the United States. Ten years had passed since then and she had returned with her children to search for her husband. He had written a letter of apology and had made several attempts at reconciliation. Linda's circumstances are markedly different from that of Mrs. Linde, though as in Ibsen, it has included some suffering which has matured her. As in Ibsen, the two women are contrasted with each other in terms of education and life experiences, but in this case they appear to have a bit more in common. They both had to drop out of school albeit for different reasons. Nneora has had working experience outside the home just as Linda, though in entirely different jobs.

177

Nneora sympathises with her friend and in turn opens up, disclosing the whole truth about her relationship with Osita and his recent threats. We learn that she never kept her promise of sexual favours to her benefactor when she raised the money for her husband's treatment abroad. Now he was threatening to reveal her secret to her husband as well as lie that they had continued their relationship even after she had married him. Linda, like Mrs. Linde, advises Nneora to tell her husband the truth rather than wait for him to find out from someone else. Nneora, like Nora, refuses to take her advice. Linda leaves when she discovers Nneora's Osita is her estranged husband. While in Ibsen, when Mrs. Linde finds out that it is Krogstad who is threatening Nora, she does not get upset, in this case, it comes as a great shock to Linda. The nature of Nneora's involvement with Osita justifies this reaction. Nneora is of course shocked by the fact as well. Evidently she had been right in not agreeing to marry him.

Later that evening, Nneora escapes the noise of the the bank's Christmas party, followed by her husband and Dr. Frank. The party is evidently a great success with many people drinking and dancing, but she leaves because she needs some fresh air. Ikenna leaves her and the doctor to pick up the letter from his desk upstairs despite Nneora's pleas otherwise. When he returns, he overhears the doctor and Nneora talking about the twins. She had kept the news from him until now and he is excited by it and says he feels they would be boys. Nneora refrains from confirming his suspicions. When they return home, he reads the letter and all hell breaks loose. The rest of the play follows very much the Ibsen plot, with Ikenna, like Torvald, brushing aside

the fact that Nneora had done what she had out of love for him. He is horrified that Osita could destroy his good name, though somehow, at this point, he does not seem to know exactly who his blackmailer is. When Linda and Osita, who had now been reconciled, arrive later to let them know that Osita was no longer going to carry out his threat (Krogstad's second letter), Ikenna is very surprised and says, "What! You! M.D.! You are the man involved! I can't believe this!" (112). As they leave, Linda mentions something about the twin sons and so confirms Ikenna's hope that he was at last going to have sons. Nneora now tells him about the ultrasound result. The turn of events are totally unexpected and Ikenna is overjoyed, not only because the threat is over but also because he is at last to have sons. He turns to his wife and declares "Oh! Nneora I love you." Nneora is unimpressed and from then on, like Nora, changes completely towards her husband. From this point, Utoh-Ezeajugh's text is almost word for word following Ibsen's text.

THE ENDING OF THE PLAY IN CONTEXT

The most significant departure from Ibsen's text is how Utoh-Ezeajugh ends the play. Nneora does not disown her duty to her children, but decides to take them with her. She says to her husband when he questions her about her duty to him and their children: "Keep *my* children out of this Ikenna! They shall be well taken care of. As for my duty to you, I have another duty just as sacred...My duty to myself" (120, emphasis added). Utoh-Ezeajugh thus separates Nneora's roles as a mother and a wife. While unable to disown the former, she puts the latter second to her own humanity. Joan Templeton observed that "Ibsen refuses to separate the Nora as mother from Nora as wife because he is identifying the whole source of her oppression, the belief in a "female nature" an immutable thing in itself whose proper sphere is domestic wifedom and whose essence is maternity" (1989b, 896).⁶ Utoh-Ezeajugh overturns this and deliberately separates the two roles, signalling quite a significant difference in African feminism as opposed to Western feminism. Mikell distinguishes an "emerging African feminism" which is distinctly different from Western feminism: a feminism which is "heterosexual and *pro-natal*" (1997, 4 emphasis added).⁷ The playwright unmistakably does not consider maternity per se a source of her heroine's oppression. The overt oppression connected with her maternal status is her husband's desire for male children and his subsequent irritation with their four daughters. This is evident when Nneora points out the possibility that the twins she was expecting could very well be girls. He responds with obvious irritation, "What do you mean? Don't tell me you are going to give birth to girls again, oh no!" When she reminds him of the fact that she was not the one who determines the sex of a baby, he tells her: "If I am the one who determines the sex, then I am definitely sure I did not give you girls to carry. After all, I am not planning to open a convent. Girls!...not even one this time but two...Oh what have I done to deserve this kind of stigma?" (102). There

is no doubt that this kind of pressure to have male children, when it is practically out of her control, can only be oppressive. With such an attitude towards their girls, it is totally understandable that she decides not to leave them behind. She, unlike Nora, has no qualms about her ability to care for them. She had, after all, dropped out of school to care for her ailing mother and younger siblings she could find a way to care for her own children.

Utoh-Ezeajugh is, however, not as definite as Ibsen in letting Nora walk out slamming the door. In fact, we do not see Nneora walk out. Instead, after telling Ikenna emphatically that she is leaving with her girls, “*she goes into the room,*” the stage direction reads, and Ikenna “*sinks down on a chair and buries his face in his hands*” (126). He laments how empty the house would be when they are gone and wonders what it is he has done to himself and to his family. He realises his mistake too late, or is it? Utoh-Ezeajugh leaves a window of hope. Ikenna remembers that Nneora had said it would take the greatest miracle—a complete change in both of them—for them to ever have a chance of happiness in their marriage ever again, but she did not have faith in miracles anymore. He clings to a glimmer of hope and there is every indication at the end that he believes such a miracle is possible.

179

THE PLAY AS A STUDY OF THE VIRTUES OF WOMANHOOD?

“*Nneora: An African Doll's House...is a study of the virtues of womanhood.*”

Alex Asigbo (260)

The comment by Asigbo quoted on the back cover of the published play purports that Utoh-Ezeajugh's play is about the virtues of womanhood. The question that readily comes to mind is how may it be regarded as such? This is an indubitable invitation to read Nneora as a virtuous woman. How may Nneora be described? At first we see her as one with a generous heart. She rebukes Mama Uduak for turning the masquerades away and then she does the extraordinary thing of paying a complete stranger's debt and giving him money for food and then helps him to secure a job, using her connections with a 'big man'. We know that she had not had an easy life, having had to shoulder heavy family responsibilities when her father died, forced to drop out of school to care for her crippled mother and younger siblings. She had found in Osita a saviour; he gave her money to start her business and helped her care for her family. The price she paid was to become his lover. This is a familiar scenario in poverty-stricken African countries where young women resort to sexual relationships with men—often much older than themselves—in order to survive or even pay their way through school. Utoh-Ezeajugh, however, gives Nneora a certain dignity in this and she does not appear immoral, though one may question the morality of her actions. Asigbo appears to acquiesce on this point when he notes that, “Nneora had exploited

Osita without malicious intent” (270). She is not a prostitute selling her body to earn a living; she loved Osita and was not in the relationship just for his money, even though she refuses to marry him because he was already married. It is because of this sense of dignity that she is able to go back to him for help when her husband is in trouble, despite the fact that she knew she could no longer be his lover. Her actions are motivated by love, love for her family and then love for Ikenna. Utoh-Ezeajugh presents Nneora thus without making her superhuman or saintly; she admits that she is a liar. She lies to Osita about Ikenna and promises to sleep with him without intending to keep her promise. She never told her husband how she managed to secure him a job and how she managed to influence the bank official to approve the release of the money for his treatment and he apparently never asked her either. How then does she reflect the ‘virtues of womanhood?’

Asigbo clarifies virtue further by saying “Nneora literally translated as ‘mother of all,’ is a symbolic name...which marks her out as an embodiment of all that is virtuous in the quintessential woman. Nneora is presented as an ideal wife—submissive without being slavish, assertive without being pugnacious” (269). It appears that for Asigbo, the virtues of Nneora are based on her self-sacrificing love for her husband which made her ‘submissive without being slavish’. In addition, she was the embodiment of true womanhood by virtue of being a mother, demonstrated not only in her symbolic name, but also by the fact of her procreative prowess. We see her assertiveness mostly in her relationship with Osita, which, it must be noted, was not a marital relationship. She gets her own way with him by persuasion and entreaties to his goodness of heart and his feelings for her. There is no trace of aggression in her appeals and this, it appears, makes her virtuous.

Earlier in his essay, Asigbo had outlined the legitimacy or grounds for the subordination of women, claiming religious, social and physiological indicators. He then summarises what he says are the three ideological leanings⁸ of Western feminism which Nigerian and other Third World women activists have “imbibed for implementation without any profound understanding or commitment on their part. Feminism and women’s liberation are thus reduced to mere slogans” (266). Utoh-Ezeajugh, must be commended, he says, for not following this path.⁹ Asigbo’s analysis of the play is sexist and I believe he misses the point. While it is true that Nneora is proud of being a mother and appears to exalt in that role, holding on to it, while rejecting her role as wife, there is every indication in the play that the playwright is seeking to draw attention to the fact that there is more to being a woman than motherhood. One may surmise that Nneora had continued to have children because of her husband’s yearning for boys and not necessarily because she wanted so many children. Adomako Ampofo discusses, using specific case studies, how African women, often against their own wills and sometimes even at the risk of their lives, continue to bear children in order to satisfy their husband’s demands for male children (2004, 128-129). Linda is another example of the playwright’s pointer to the fact there is more to womanhood than motherhood. The important point here is that, though Linda

was initially disadvantaged as a result of her early maternity, she did not remain in that disadvantaged position but fought back; through hard work and education, she found her worth beyond maternity and wifehood. She does this, however, without giving up her children. Nneora, seeing Linda's example, resolves to go back to school and make something more out of her life without Ikenna (but with her children) when she comes to the realisation that he is no longer worthy of her love.

The fact that we do not see Nneora leave slamming the door, suggesting a ray of hope of reconciliation could be interpreted as the playwright's desire to lessen the blow on male sensibilities. It may also be an indication that perhaps the fight for equal rights by African women is not as confrontational as their counterparts elsewhere. This obviously appeals to a male critic like Asigbo and he observes that "in this play, even though men are presented as antagonists, the author doesn't leave them without redemption" signalling the playwright's call on "women not to forget their feminine virtues but to see themselves as mothers of the world" (270). In other words, as 'mothers of the world' they must have compassion on their erring male 'children' and show virtue in forgiving and accommodating them sacrificially rather than confronting and fighting them in aggressive overt ways. He suggests the fight (if there is any fight at all) should be more covert with women uniting to subvert male domination without appearing to do so. To my mind this is analogous to condoning with your oppressor in your own oppression with the hope that they would eventually realise the need to cease oppressing you.

181

Ibsen's ending, as has been well documented, caused a furor in his day. Forced by circumstances¹⁰ and under protest, Ibsen himself provided an alternative ending where Nora in a melodramatic turn of events and under emotional pressure from Torvald decides to stay because of the thought of her children remaining motherless (Worral xl). After all these years that ending, considered too radical in Ibsen's day, still discomfits directors and audiences and often there are changes made to it.¹¹ In a 2007 graduate student production of Ibsen's play at the School of Performing Arts in Accra, the ending was altered. The children come in with the nurse, having been awoken by the noise of their parents' exchanges and the slamming of the door by their mother. On discovering what has happened, the nurse runs after Nora, assuring the children that she would return with their mother. Torvald is left comforting the children, assuring them that she would return. Toril Moi (2006) discusses the idealist longing for a 'sense of uplift' in drama, which the lack of reconciliation between Nora and Torvald denies. Her discussion provides some insights into why this ending has been seen as so problematic; for some of the idealist critics she discusses, the lack of "reconciliation between the spouses was entirely unnatural, running against common psychological sense" (259). The audience's expectations of a confirmation of the status quo, which would give them a sense of an uplift is not met, and thus the discomfiture.

In the Iranian transcreation of the play into a film, *Sara*, discussed by Rochelle Wright, the heroine has one daughter whom she takes along when she leaves. But as

Wright points out, in a Muslim society this act was just as radical as Nora leaving her children:

For a western woman, abandoning one's children carries almost as great a stigma today as in Ibsen's time. In Iran and other Muslim countries, however, where men exercise complete legal control over their offspring, the expected outcome would be for Hessam (Torvald) to exert his rights and demand that the child remain with him. Sara's virtual kidnapping of her daughter is in fact at least as radical an act as Nora's, since it is a direct challenge to patriarchal authority (5).

182 Utoh-Ezeajugh's ending must also be considered in context. As mentioned above, Ikenna regarded his daughters as a nuisance and was eager for male children. At the point where Nneora decides to leave, he has just discovered that his wife is expecting twin sons. His dreams were finally to be fulfilled but Nneora's action would deny him the satisfaction of raising his own sons. In her uncertainty about her husband's reactions to Osita's pending revelation, Nneora chose to keep her knowledge that the twins she was carrying were boys from him; he only gets to know by chance when Linda mentions it at the last moment. Evidently there is some degree of deliberation here by Nneora calculated to inflict the most pain on Ikenna. If all she was to him, after all she had sacrificed for him, was a carrier of his precious sons, then he would be denied knowledge of them. In a reversal of Ibsen where Nora's 'moral degeneration' made her unfit to care for her children, Ikenna's insensitivity made him unfit to be a father to his sons. The fact that we do not actually see Nneora walk out of the door may be read as signalling hope for a reunion, but it does not take away from the fact that she has actually made up her mind to leave. She had returned his wedding ring and, as Ikenna himself says, "I can't stop them. She has made up her mind" (126). Even if there is reconciliation, it would take some time. It had taken her friend Linda ten years to return to her husband, but only after he had apologised and shown signs of repentance.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, *Nneora: An African Doll's House* does present us with a study of the virtues of African womanhood but not in the sense in which Asigbo asserts. They are not virtuous merely because they are mothers and subservient to their husbands and are non-confrontational. They are virtuous because of their enormous strength in the face of the most dehumanising circumstances. In her survey of contemporary themes which engage the attention of Nigerian playwrights, Utoh-Ezeajugh notes the prominence of the feminist question:

In addressing these issues of pressing concern in postcolonial Nigeria, the feminist question of gender equality could not escape the myriad of themes open to playwrights. With many independent African nations approving affirmative action which will give women access to power,...the nation has begun to witness a continuing and strengthen-

ing commitment to the principle of gender equality. Drama has become an avenue for gender expression. (280)

She is not left out of the list of Nigerian playwrights expressing their gender perspectives through the medium of drama. She recreates Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, transposing it into an African cultural setting with distinctly Nigerian perspectives on issues relating to male female relations and marriage. The part of the play where Nneora and Linda share each other's stories serves as the unambiguous feminist statement of the playwright:

Nneora: Well, what can I say? We have no right to complain and we have no options. We are women and once we marry, we must stay under our men.

Linda: Nneora wake up! We actually have rights! It is just that we have been brought up in a hypocritical society where 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. (70-71)

Nneora, who had met her husband when he was penniless and in a desperate situation and through her own self-sacrificing devotion helps him to a respectable status, at this point in the play appears resigned to a fate of subservience. Linda's assertions serve to enlighten her and in the end she finds her voice and throws off the yoke of subservience. The unique brand of African feminism which is pro-natal and exalts in the role of motherhood, seeing it not as a limitation, but as a God-given privilege of honour is explicit in the play. Nneora is a proud mother of four girls and is expecting twin sons. This does not deter her when at the end she decides to walk away from her marriage with her children. Beyond this, the playwright presents African women as very strong and resilient in unfavourable circumstances. She sees education as key in the fight for equality with their male counterparts.

183

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NOTES

1. Some examples of such adaptations include Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* adapted by the Nigerian Ola Rotimi as *The Gods Are Not to Blame*; *Edufa*, Efua Sutherland’s adaptation of Euripides’s *Alcestis* into a Ghanaian context; *Land of A Million Magicians*, a Ghanaian adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan* by Mohamed Ben Abdallah; Soyinka’s *Opera Wonyosi*, an adaptation of Brecht’s *The Three Penny Opera*; and Joe DeGraff’s *Mambo*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

Wetmore Jr's book *The Athenian Sun in An African Sky* discusses a number of Ancient Greek plays adapted by African playwrights.

2. See Joan Templeton's lively and convincing essay, "The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism and Ibsen," where she debunks the various arguments purporting to show why Ibsen's play may not be read as in support of the feminist movement.
3. The situation is, of course, not as simplistic as this may sound. This emphasis on child bearing can be a source of oppression for women, especially those unable to bear children for medical reasons. In this case they are regarded as not womanly enough and are subject to all manner of social ridicule. In fact, this may be the basis for divorce in some instances, or a license for men to marry an additional wife. The severity of the social stigma of remaining childless is captured in the terms used to describe such people. Akosua Adomako has noted that "Among the Akan an infertile woman is referred to as *boni*, a term used to describe brackish water in which no fish can thrive" (2004, 122). Though childless men may also be subjects of ridicule, women are more often blamed for childlessness in a marriage than men. Additionally, the responsibilities associated with childbearing and rearing does in practical ways impinge on women's ability to compete at par with their male counterparts in demanding career domains. African women who succeed in combining motherhood and demanding careers have to work harder and do so only with the help of others, relatives or paid helpers.
4. In Nigeria as in Ghana, Christmas is often marked by masquerades going round soliciting money in exchange for dance and song performances which may have nothing to do with the Christian idea of the birth of Christ, and indeed are more a celebration of the successful end of the year than that birth. Christmas decorations, such as Christmas trees, may also be absent in many homes, especially in more traditional settings. In fact there is no mention of a Christmas tree in the play.
5. By current exchange rates, that is about five US dollars. The minimum wage per month is currently about 40 US dollars.
6. Toril Moi also reads "Nora's refusal to define herself as a wife and mother as a rejection of Hegel's theory of women's role in the family and society" and thus considers that *A Doll's House* is 'about women's historical transition from being generic family members (wife, sister, daughter, mother) to becoming individuals' (285). Utoh-Ezeajugh's Nneora defines herself as a mother (her name is in fact symbolic of this), but she is not confined only to this, nor does the fact take away from her individuality.
7. Though, of course, African feminism has developed over the years and there are currently different shades and tensions within it. See Adomako Ampofo et al (2004) for a discussion of the different hues of African feminism.
8. The three 'ideological leanings,' he says, quoting Gayle Yates, are: "The feminists who maintain that women are equal to men, the women's liberationists who insist that women are over against men or at least separate from them, and the androgynous who claim that women and men are equal to each other" (266).
9. He is not alone in his commendation. He quotes from Femi Osofisan's preface to Utoh-Ezeajugh's collection of plays in which he notes her 'surprisingly' different approach to feminism.
10. A star German actress had refused to play the role of Nora if the ending was not changed. She did not want to be perceived as a woman who could leave her children for her own egoistical liberation. This could have spelt the end of her career. The first English actress offered the role also turned it down for similar reasons (Worthen 599).
11. In an interesting and radicalized 2002 exception, Thomas Ostermeier updates *A Doll's House* where Nora, rather than leave her husband, shoots him, shifting the focus of Ibsen's theme of self-realization to revenge (Wright 2006).