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BEYKENT ÜNİVERSİTESİ
LİSANSÜSTÜ EĞİTİM ENSTİTÜSÜ
İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI
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**GENDER PERSPECTIVES INTO RACIAL
CHALLENGES: A CRITICAL READING OF WORKS
BY BOLA AGBAJE AND INUA ELLAMS**

Yüksek Lisans Tezi

Tezi Hazırlayan
Hilal Melahat FIRAT BAYRAKÇIL

İstanbul, 2022

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ÖZ

IRKSAL ZORLUKLARA İLİŞKİN TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET TEMELLİ BAKİŞ AÇISI: BOLA AGBAJE VE INUA ELLAMS'IN ESERLERİNİN ELEŞTİREL OKUMASI

Tiyatro toplumdaki mevcut problemlere ışık tutar ve azınlıklara seslerini duyurma fırsatı verir. Bu sebeple siyahi İngiliz tiyatrosu da göçmenler için önemli bir rol oynamıştır. Her ikisi de Nijerya kökenli İngiliz oyun yazarı olarak çok benzer özgeçmişlere sahip Bola Agbaje ve Inua Ellams sahneyi kullanarak kendilerini oyun metinlerinin içine eklemektedir. Her iki yazar da Nijerya ve İngiltere arasında kalmış olduklarından benzer kimlik problemleri yaşamaktadır; fakat toplumsal cinsiyet konusuna olan bakış açılarının yansıması oyunlarında farklı şekillerde görülmektedir. Odakları her bir oyunda değişiklik gösterse de hiper-erkeklik, kadın dayanışması ve toplumsal cinsiyet kurallarının reddi gibi benzer toplumsal cinsiyet öğelerini her iki yazar da işlemiştir. Bu tez kapsamında, Bola Agbaje'nin *Gone too Far!*, *Off the Endz*, *Playing the Game* ve *Belong* ile Inua Ellams'ın *Barber Shop Chronicles*, *Three Sisters*, *The Half-God of Rainfall* ve *Black T-Shirt Collection* adlı oyunları incelenerek Agbaje ve Ellams'ın benimsedikleri toplumsal cinsiyetin Birleşik Krallık'taki Nijerya diasporasında tecrübe ettikleri ırksal zorluklar üzerindeki bakış açılarını nasıl etkilediği göstermek amaçlanmıştır.

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ABSTRACT

GENDER PERSPECTIVES INTO RACIAL CHALLENGES: A CRITICAL READING OF WORKS BY BOLA AGBAJE AND INUA ELLAMS

Theatre presents current problems of the society and it gives minorities a chance to be heard and for that reason, black British theatre has a significant role for the immigrants. Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams, who share very similar backgrounds as they are both British playwrights of Nigerian origin, use the stage to write themselves into the script. They both experience similar identity problems as they feel torn between Nigeria and Britain; however, their perspectives on the gender issue reflect on their plays differently. Their focus varies in each play, but they share similar gender elements such as hypermasculinity, women's solidarity and gender nonconformity. In this thesis, Bola Agbaje's *Gone too Far!*, *Off the Endz*, *Playing the Game* and *Belong*, and Inua Ellams' *Barber Shop Chronicles*, *Three Sisters*, *The Half-God of Rainfall* and *Black T-Shirt Collection* are analysed in order to show the effects of Agbaje and Ellams' gender has on their perspective on the racial challenges they experience in the Nigerian diaspora in the United Kingdom.

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GLOSSARY

Diaspora: The movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland.

Hypermasculinity: Extremely or excessively masculine.

Immigrant: One that immigrates such as a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence

Intersectionality: the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

Nonconformity: Refusal to conform to an established or conventional creed, rule, or practice.

Solidarity: Unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian immigrants play an important role in shaping the Black British stages. They use their experiences of diasporic communities in Britain to focus on issues such as migration and belonging. Victoria Sams states that for the immigrants “theatre has presented diverse versions of home” (2014, p. 8) and generally, plays by these immigrant playwrights focus on ways in which patriarchal oppression feeds racism and creates challenges for black immigrants on a daily basis.

Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams share very similar backgrounds as they are both of Nigerian origin. Inua Ellams, born in 1984 in Nigeria, moved to London as a child and Bola Agbaje, though she was born in London in 1981 and spent most of her childhood there, spent two years in Nigeria when she was only six years old. Bola Agbaje can be considered to be a second-generation immigrant, modern contemporary playwright while Inua Ellams, who is too old to be considered as a second generation immigrant and too young to be a first generation, can be referred as the 1.5 generation, a term which was generated by some sociologists who believe that people like Ellams experience “dual socialisation” (Pearce, 2017, p. 167). Not only were these two aforementioned playwrights exposed to their ethnicity by the people around them, but they were also able to experience the source of their culture first-hand.

Regardless of their political background, immigrant playwrights have paid the most attention to the effects of not belonging to one place. Lacking a sense of belonging to one country influences their perspective as human beings. This also holds true for Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams. When they are in London, they are not considered British and when they are in Nigeria, they are too alienated to be considered Nigerian. Bola Agbaje expresses her depravity of a sense of belonging when she states:

I didn't know if I was African or British. In England I was called African, in Nigeria a black girl with an English accent I was called British and when I returned to England with an African accent I was called African. I was so confused for a very long time. (Agbaje, 2010 as cited in Pearce, 2017, p. 171)

Ellams experiences a similar sense of alienation with his identity. He states in an interview that “there wasn't a place I spiritually or culturally belonged. I felt like I had lacked a clear or specific identity” (Wildness, 2017). However, he enjoys using his

lack of belonging on his quest to construct his cultural foundation. He experiments with different themes and styles, and takes the audience to various journeys. He states that he started his writing career as a poet, later on he adapted his poems for stage and performed them himself. After he became a monodramatist, he created more detailed plays for more people to perform on stage (Wildness, 2017). Agbaje, on the other hand, wanted to start her stage career as an actress; however, as a black woman, could not find herself a place in the creative industry. As she states in an podcast interview, she saw this problem as an opportunity and decided to quit acting and write herself into scripts (Coles, 2015).

Consequently, both Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams choose to focus on the themes that they feel familiar with. Even though they share so many similarities in terms of their cultural background, they concentrate on different themes in their plays. Both of them are people of diaspora; therefore, they are able to address both countries. However, it does not necessarily mean that they actually feel a sense of belonging to either of them. Zuzanna Olszewska states “tension between exile and acclimatization to a new home; between old world and new life, belonging and alienation, is often seen as the hallmark of the diasporic subject” (2019, p. 86). As these subjects are the most fundamental issues for people, they are frequently mentioned in many literary texts, including Agbaje’s and Ellams’ plays. As a result of the struggle they face being in the diaspora, they are always in the quest of constructing their identities. People in the diaspora start to adopt the identity of their alienated image. And hence the colonial identity is comprised of “not Self and Other, but the ‘Other-ness’ of the Self” (Bhabha, 1986, p. XXVII). As Nigeria was colonized by the British, the idea of self for Nigerians emerged from the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Homi Bhabha states that the colonizer wants to both “improve” the country they colonized and also wants to keep them different enough to make them feel alienated all the time. This power struggle creates mimicry which “emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal” (1984, p. 126). Therefore, Nigerians end up constructing an identity which is “almost the same, but not quite” (p. 127). Black people’s questioning of self also pushes them to question their existence within the European culture. Their constructed self is not born out of their nationality, instead, it

emerges out of the white civilization as Fanon states “black soul is a white man’s artifact” (1952/1986, p. 6).

The way they address the gender theme is quite different. While gender issues are more prominent in Ellams’ plays, Agbaje chooses to pursue a subtler approach. Agbaje’s plays are more about black people and the problems they experience in Britain within the Nigerian diaspora, while Ellams chooses to address gender issues more because while he was growing up, he was predominantly exposed to a feminine influence.

In this thesis, I aim to compare how the two playwrights’ genders reflect onto the racial challenges in their plays under three subheadings as hypermasculinity, women’s solidarity and gender nonconformity. The body of the thesis is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter of the thesis, both Bola Agbaje’s and Inua Ellams’ short biographies are presented, including their works included in the analysis and what inspired their process of writing. In the second chapter, works of the playwrights are analysed thoroughly under the light of the aforementioned gender themes.

CHAPTER ONE

1. SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PLAYWRIGHTS

1.1. Bola Agbaje

Theatre reflects the political atmosphere and it invites the audience to have an inner journey by presenting the problems of the society and pushing them to think about these cases. Wiltshire and Cowan point to the fact that there are so many playwrights who commit themselves to represent the minority groups in order to criticize the current status of these groups of people (2018). Therefore, it is not surprising to witness the emergence of black British theatre. The first recognized Black playwrights in Britain came out in 1950s, among these black writers are Errol John, Barry Reckord and Wole Soyinka who are considered successful thanks to their accomplishment at the Royal Court. Even though Errol John's award winner play *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1957) was outshined by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), he and other forthcoming playwrights still had considerable influence on succeeding black practitioners in 1960s and 70s. In those years, the success of black British theatre was attributed only to male playwrights as, in Sumbwanyambe words, "black female playwrights were virtually invisible on the British stage" (2018, p. 204). However, it was only in the 1990s that black women playwrights finally claimed their voices and Bola Agbaje became one of the prominent female black British playwrights with others "such as Rachel de la Hey, Michaela Coel, Charlene James and Theresa Ikoko" (p. 205), which brought a huge popularity to black British theatre. Consequently, this diversity of voices and perspectives delivered a range of social and political point of views to the stage. One can even say that the theatre finally started mirroring the real London, the city that has one of the most multicultural communities in the world.

Being one of the pioneers, Bola Agbaje completed the Critical Mass Programme, which is a special organization run by the Royal Court since 2004, providing annual writing workshops for playwrights with minority ethnic backgrounds. Having debuted at the Royal Court in 2007 *Gone Too Far!* won an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement as well as a Most Promising Playwright nomination at the Evening Standard Awards in 2008 (Reinelt, 2010). Her success

persisted with many other plays such as *Detaining Justice*, *Off the Endz* and *Belong*, which mostly focus on social problems experienced by minorities living in the United Kingdom. Another factor that greatly contributes to Bola Agbaje's success as a playwright is that her works are not "marked as 'women's' or 'feminist'" (p. 554). On the one hand, it should be acceptable for everyone if a good play about challenges faced by women in the society, domestic or otherwise, finds an audience. On the other hand, it is important that women are not stereotyped as authors who exclusively write for women (p. 555).

The aforementioned male playwrights played important roles in Bola Agbaje's career and she refers to Wole Soyinka as her mentor. Soyinka's works are primarily about Nigeria, the country he left behind. His works also dealt with how immigrants like him encounter constant racism and discrimination in the United Kingdom. Soyinka, who won the Nobel prize in literature in 1986, in an interview with a freelance journalist Simon Stanford explains that his interest in culture is comparative, and Soyinka continues with the statement that he really enjoys seeing how relatable different cultures can be. Everyone can find parts of their own cultures in another culture and he believes theatre to be the best medium to reach a wide range of people. He explains that theatre deals with visuals and movements as it is very dynamic. Reading a work of art can be a very limiting experience while theatre is able to unveil even the most complicated image and make it clear for any audience. Soyinka concludes by saying that one "can use the stage as a social vehicle" (Stanford, 2005).

Soyinka is a political playwright and it is not surprising to see his influence on Bola Agbaje's plays as well. When she identifies her focus in her works, she says that they are "prominently about black people, the black experience, identity and belonging" (2015). She has a distinctive flair in terms of putting her observation into words especially culture of the young people of the city. In Ekumah-Asamoah words, she "provides an accurate voice for the third generation of Africans in the diaspora" (2015, p. 125) though she is a second generation immigrant who produces works in mostly male dominated dramatists era. She also makes her audience question what it means to be British in the new century by presenting them with variety and diversity (2015). As a second generation immigrant, her experience of the Nigerian culture is limited to her brief time she stayed in Nigeria when she was a child. However, she has

a strong bond with the Nigerian culture and at the same time she feels emotionally connected to her heritage; therefore, it is not surprising to see the reflection of this connection in her works (2015). In her interview with Laura Barnett, Bola Agbaje states that she was really inspired by a play called *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968) which was written by Ola Rotimi. It was a Tiate Fahodzi production, a company that produces multicultural plays. Bola Agbaje was astounded by the idea of seeing a play that is closely connected to her culture. Watching that play was a turning point for her as she decided to become a playwright and produce plays that celebrate her Yoruba culture (Barnett, 2012). In her play *Gone Too Far!*, she positions her Nigerian identity through language. She makes her characters speak Yoruba language as a way of mixing her British and Nigerian culture and when characters use indigenous words and expressions, they are not translated purposefully for the British audience (Ekumah-Asamoah, 2015, p. 130). By doing so, she shows the audience a life through her own perspective. This also makes the audience to become familiar with an African language, which is hardly ever heard on stage. Martanovschi argues that Bola Agbaje's goals of confirming her Nigerian identity and raising knowledge about African cultures in the United Kingdom are achieved by exposing the audience to unfamiliar noises (2019).

While Bola Agbaje's main focus is mostly about her culture and her heritage, we cannot eliminate the role of gender in her plays. She accepts the fact that she will always need to talk about being black and a woman even if she does not prefer to. In a radio programme, she mentioned that her gender had never been an issue or something to pay attention to while growing up because she had been surrounded by women all the time. Her main concern was always about her identity as she felt torn between Nigeria and Britain. However, when she started school, she began to observe how black women and white women were treated differently. Some behaviours were always attributed to the black girls such as having arguments and giving an attitude. When a white girl kissed her teeth, which is a common gesture for black people, she was warned not to act like a black person as it did not suit her. These type of subtle discriminations made her feel like "the other". In the same radio programme, she talks about how she started her career. At first she wanted to be an actress because of the fame it brings; therefore, she started acting school. However, she stated "women rarely

existed in scripts and black women were never anywhere to be seen” and she felt really isolated as “white women had it hard but [she] had it harder” (2015). That is why she wanted her story to be heard but this time not to be famous, but to be able to reach others. This awakening made her quit drama school and she started to “write herself into the script” and wrote about people like her (2015).

Ekumah-Asamoah describes Agbaje’s style as a Western one with linear narratives in most of her plays (2015). Character developments in her plays generally follow a chronological sequence. During their development, the characters are faced with events that force them to embrace their true identities. For instance, her plays *Gone too Far!* and *Belong* reflect her style the most accurately as they focus on the sense of belonging as characters try to explore their true identity. *Gone too Far!* especially has an important place in Bola Agbaje’s career; not because it is her first play, but because it mirrors her ambition to become a playwright. It is also significant because it reflects her own personal experience and she “explores how intra-racial hostilities drive cultural retention and the maintenance of homeland nationalism” (Pearce, 2017, p. 209). *Off the Endz* is her other play that explores the theme of climbing up the social ladder and exaggerated black masculinity. The play addresses issues such as “race, poverty, criminality and friendship” (Beswick, 2014, p. 104). And finally, *Playing the Game* is a short play in which the audience can witness Agbaje’s witty and more humorous side. In this satire, even though there are still racial conflicts, Agbaje openly focuses on gender issues, instead of identity and the sense of belonging.

1.2. Inua Ellams

Salman Rushdie, who was an immigrant himself of Indian origin, stated once that immigrants are people whose feelings of connection to their country of origin are severed; while at the same time, they are unable to fully connect with the culture in the country in which they live. Therefore, literature for them is a means of reconnecting with what they have lost through a world that they create (Rushdie, 1991). Theatre has the same importance for the Nigerian immigrants in the United Kingdom. Many artists used theatre as a medium to reconnect with their roots, hoped to feel the “sense of home and belonging” and reflected the challenges they experienced as people who

were alienated from their homelands. Through plays, these artists tried to establish their identities and “make themselves at home” (Sams, 2014, p. 7). As an immigrant, Inua Ellams describes his identity as a mixture of Irish, British, Nigerian, Christian and Muslim, “a skinny black immigrant ball of angst” (TEDx, 2016). Therefore, he used writing as a tool to control this feeling of anxiety, a little getaway for him to breathe and define who he really is.

When Inua Ellams introduces himself, he says that he is “a poet, a playwright, a performer, a graphic designer and illustrator, and a midnight runner” (Wildness, 2017). Another attempt by Ellams to form his identity is *The Midnight Run*, which basically is an event where a group of strangers, including artists, gather and explore the whole city of London on foot. They aim to discover who they are, where they have come from and how “identity space, place, narrative and destiny” (2017) influence their choices. In terms of style, Inua Ellams cannot be limited to one style as he is influenced by different playwrights and writers. His idols vary from William Shakespeare to Lucy Pebble, and as a result of these different influences, he has experimented with different techniques in his plays. In his interview with Barbara Bleinman, he describes his writing procedure as follows;

All my plays begin as poems, as short poems. And they become plays when, in trying to write the poem or tell the complete truth of the poem, they become bigger, more complex, more nuanced, more multi-voiced worlds. Those voices become characters and as they begin to interact, debate and argue with each other, the poem becomes a play. When I finish writing a poem it sits on the desk for a couple of weeks before I go back and edit it and then it's finished. When I finish writing a play, it is only the beginning of the work. (2020)

Inua Ellams' plays vary in style. Compared to Bola Agbaje's plays, Ellams seems to be more experimental. He is initially a monodramatist, and he prefers combining poems with plays. For instance, *The 14th Tale*, *Untitled*, *Knight Watch* and *Black T-Shirt Collection* are both written and performed by him and they mainly focus on his personal experiences. However, he does not limit himself with only one technique and when he was asked about his approach to theatre, he explains that he prefers incorporating traditional drama with new styles where he can mirror himself

(Bleiman, 2020). For instance, *Three Sisters*, which is adaptation of Chekhov's famous play of the same name, indicates that Ellams is also influenced by the absurdist drama. Even though Anton Chekhov himself cannot be categorized as an absurdist playwright, he was an influential figure for modern theatre, and has become an inspiration for many modern absurdist playwrights (Sasani & Ghasemi, 2011). Chekhov's play *Three Sisters* shares similarities with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as the characters "are passively waiting for better life" (p. 225). Just like in the original play, Ellams' adaptation presents three sisters, who are constantly stating their desire to go back to their former home but are not actually doing anything. However, their passiveness does not make them insignificant characters, on the contrary, they are the ones who are more outspoken than their male counterparts. In his interview with Clair Armitstead, Ellams dedicates this play to his sisters, whom he refers to as strong and powerful individuals "with qualities that are stereotypically, and wrongly, associated with masculinity" (2019).

His creative mind and desire to combine different traditions can be seen in his play *The Half-God of Rainfall*, which combines different literary genres. Ellams refers to this play as the one of which he feels the proudest since he recreated a new poetic style to achieve this new narrative. As he states, he "mixed Nigerian with Mology with Greek Mythology, urban pop culture with social activism, and gender politics with sports" (Bleiman, 2020) which makes for a unique and interesting experience to read.

Compared to Bola Agbaje, the gender issue is more predominant in Ellams' plays. He never thought himself as a typical man, because as he says he "was born with a twin sister so before [he] was conscious that [he] existed, one could say [he] was close to feminine energy" (TEDx, 2016). With his play *Barber Shop Chronicles*, he aimed to be the voice of black men who struggled to fit in the way that society expects them to behave. The play sets in different barber shops in different cities such as London, Lagos, Accra, Kampala, Joburg and Harare. Ellams invites the audience to the world of men where they can sincerely reveal who they really are. Ellams notices that barber shops function as therapy for many men since they share their most personal problems with each other; therefore, the setting of the play is especially important because Ellams aims to redefine black masculinity by presenting the struggles black men experience on a daily basis.

CHAPTER TWO

2. GENDER PERSPECTIVES WITHIN THE PLAYS

2.1. Hypermasculinity in Agbaje and Ellams' Plays

As an immigrant, Inua Ellams has struggled more than his peers in forming an identity for himself. He has endured racism growing up resulting in him becoming more aggressive and defensive. In an interview, he points out that he was born a man. However, he became a black man once he stepped into England. As a teenager, he was expected to behave in a certain, aggressive way and this caused him to become tougher. He was constantly in a defensive mood in order to avoid any possible threats and he thinks this is the result of racism that black men are exposed to throughout their adolescence (Guardian Culture, 2017). These men build a metaphorical shield to protect themselves from being antagonized. As Judith Butler states in their essay “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*” (1988, p. 519). Ellams points out that he was always told to “man-up” or “stop acting like a girl” at school which made him question who he really was. He had a close relationship with his twin sister, whom he could not beat in wrestling and he was constantly criticised for not being a typical man. Therefore, as he declares he became aware of the “mental health repercussions of living in hyper-masculine societies” (2019). It was these experiences that inspired the main theme of *Barber Shop Chronicles*.

Black men are negatively associated with criminality, violence and gangster culture by the white society. They always have to “deal with prejudice and the negative, stereotypic connotations associated with Black masculinity, which is often inherently viewed as hypermasculinity” (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004, p. 236) which can be defined as “the exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability” (p. 234). Ellams aimed to create a space for the black men where they do not have to pretend to be someone that society expects them to be and he realised that barber shops are the best place for it. In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, he focuses on six different barber shops in six different cities, on the same day when there is a football match between Chelsea and Barcelona.

Dialogues occur between the costumers and the shop owners very organically. One of the first examples of the stereotypical image of a black man can be seen when Winston, a Caribbean man, and Samuel, a young British Nigerian, are casually talking about a comical incident they had witnessed, in scene 8. They are in a barber shop in London, and characters start discussing intensely whether African people prefer to drink or smoke. Samuel triggers the argument when he states that he prefers weed over alcohol. This statement immediately draws Ohene's attention, who is a forty-year-old Ghanaian man, and he blames the West, including black immigrants there, for using artists like Fela Kuti to influence the young negatively. He thinks that the West, and indirectly Kuti himself, is the reason behind the young people's smoking, focused on nothing but making music and not getting proper jobs (Ellams, 2017, p. 54) and that is the image the West sees fit for a black young man.

The same profiling can be seen in Bola Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!* The play demonstrates two brothers in south London streets who are sent by their mother to get some milk. This little quest actually turns into a moral tale that emphasizes the struggle that teenagers face in order to adapt to their life in the United Kingdom. Ikudayisi is the older brother who grew up in Nigeria and is proud to represent his nationality, while Yemi, the younger brother who was raised in London, rejects his Nigerian heritage in order to adapt a "black Caribbean British identity" (Pearce, 2017, p. 135). When the brothers are walking around, they come across two young girls from the neighbourhood, with whom they start a casual conversation. Armani, who is a fifteen-year-old mixed raced girl, is surprised to hear that Yemi is actually a Nigerian black. The main problem here is that she genuinely thinks she has complimented him by thinking he is Caribbean, not Nigerian. Furthermore, she even states that he should feel lucky as he does not have physical features of an African man. However, Yemi still reacts defensively and exclaims that he was born in London (Agbaje, 2007).

Yemi also tends to get really angry when he encounters racism and his temper puts him to trouble all the time. His style reflects how he wants to be seen from outside, like a rapper with a stylish hoodie and up-to-fashion sneakers. However, when he is asked to remove his hood by a shopkeeper, who is a Muslim Bangladeshi with a scarf, he immediately becomes aggressive. Unfortunately, this unjust accusation by the shopkeeper shows how society sees a black man with a hoodie. When Yemi tries to

explain himself, he becomes very obstinate and is immediately misunderstood by the Bangladeshi man; however, all Yemi wants to do is to draw attention to the similarities both of them unjustly encounter as immigrants in London (Agbaje, 2007). Yemi neither steps back nor apologizes, he instead proves the shopkeeper right by yelling and kicking the door. His brother Ikudayisi on the other hand, who is a complete stranger to the struggles that a black man experiences in London, tries to bring him to his senses when he says “You have to pick your battles well. Taking your hood off is nothing” (p. 11) as he thinks shopkeeper’s reaction is not due to the fact that they are black. However, Yemi is quite sure that it is the case, and accuses the shopkeeper of being racist, which is ironic since he has been constantly making racist statements about him from the beginning as he calls him Indian and implies that he is a terrorist (Agbaje, 2007). Yemi’s aggression derives from his attempt to hide his vulnerability as he feels his power is being taken away from him. That is why he shows characteristics that can be associated with hypermasculinity.

When Bola Agbaje talks about the brothers, she states that “Ikudaysi is slightly more grounded because Ikudaysi knows who he is. He is proud of where he is from and he is not there to prove anything to anyone. Whereas Yemi constantly felt that he needs to prove himself, to his friends, to the people in this state and to his brother” (Royal Court Theatre, 2021). Her statement explains the constant anger Yemi feels throughout the play. As these brothers interact with different people, audience can witness social conflicts that Nigerian immigrants experience on a daily basis. The play tries to imply that the main issue of the black youth in Britain results from a “sense of identity disconnect. The solution provided to Yemi is to acknowledge and embrace his Nigerian heritage” (Pearce, 2017, p. 141). Yemi has alienated himself from his Nigerian origin to such an extent that he does not even know what his name stands for and he cannot speak the Yoruba language. It can be understood from Archer and Yamashita’s essay that the reason behind this alienation caused black youth to be aggressive because “dominant and attractive/popular (‘hegemonic’) discourses of masculinity were drawn from black Caribbean sources, mixed with US black ‘rap’ elements and grounded within a local London context. These identities were ‘personified’ in the myth of the ‘rude boy’ or ‘bad boy’” (2003, p. 122).

Yemi's first reconciliation with his origin happens when his idol Blazer proudly states that he is Nigerian. He is a well-respected figure in the estate and everyone knows not to mess with him. He grows a thick skin in order to overcome all the racist assaults he encounters and he becomes one of the most frightening figures. He wants Yemi to embrace his nationality and to be proud of it, so he tells him that he should be proud to be different. Blazer tells Yemi that he is aware of the obligation to follow all the gender roles that the society attributes to black men in order to be who he wants to be. He also adds:

[People] can say what they want behind my back, but to my face, mans have to be careful what they say. And that's the way I like it. Gone are da [sic] days when mans [sic] take the piss out of this African! Cos [sic] I run this estate now. And you know, I know they don't like it. But what can they do? The roles have reversed now (Agbaje, 2007, p. 52).

Off the Endz is another one of Bola Agbaje's plays where the theme of hypermasculinity is prominent. The play focuses on a black couple, Sharon and Kojo, who are expecting a baby, and David, who is their childhood friend. It starts with David bursting into the lives of the couple as soon as he is released from prison and immediately brings chaos to the household. He represents the life that Kojo and Sharon try to leave behind. He both belittles their bourgeois lifestyle and disrespects their hospitality. He believes trying to get a job is futile, and he starts dealing drugs as soon as he gets out of prison. He causes disagreement between the couple and he "becomes the fatal tempter who tries to seduce the debt-ridden Kojo with the prospect of quick money and a life of freedom" (Billington, 2010). David is the embodiment of exaggerated masculinity. When he goes to the jobcentre as a part of his probation period, he does a perfunctory job with the bureaucracy and expects the advisor to do the same. Marsha, the advisor, asks him the details about his job hunt, but David claims that he is not "the 'flipping burger' kind of guy" (Agbaje, 2010, p. 22). Marsha genuinely wants to help him as she asks him if he wants to be doing what he has been doing for the rest of his life and gives him a number to call for a job interview. However, David does not want to start with minimum wage, which with a criminal record seems to be the only option for him, an option that he does not choose. David's situation is actually well-described by Gloria Jean Watkins, known as bell hooks. She

states that upon realizing that what money represents is not a product of hard and ethic work but rather it represents the scales of their masculinity, they confine themselves within this vicious cycle. When money reflects one's success in life regardless of the way it is obtained, there is a change in class values among black people. "Adopting that worldview changed the dynamics of work in black communities. Black men who could show they had money (no matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful" (2004, p. 18). Unfortunately, the play also shows us that if black men work in respectable jobs, they are the first ones to be discarded. Kojo works for a big corporation; however, he is constantly scared of losing his job. When David visits him at work and makes a scene, he panics and warns him not to come to his workplace because he thinks "they are watching [his] every move. Any slip-ups and [he] could be out the door" (Agbaje, 2010, p. 16). Eventually, his fears come true as he is one of the first employees to be sacked once the company goes into administration and the timing of it could not be worst. As hooks states, even if black men make money in a legitimate way, they cannot escape from being stuck on the pain of patriarchal masculinity. Even if they make it, they might still question their existence and purpose of life (2004). Kojo and David discuss about whether life is testing them or not and David feels envious of Kojo's determination as he sorted everything out. On the other hand, Kojo needs David's help since everything in his life started to fall apart (2010). David's insistence on choosing the illegal way of earning money is a consequence of the way that black men are always perceived in the society. Unlike David, Kojo actually shows the possibility of a black man's chance to break all the stereotypes but unfortunately he has to give in eventually. As David and Kojo say, life is testing them all the time, and as black men, it is testing them even more. Their challenge is to overcome the feeling of inferiority resulted from years of racism and Frantz Fanon states:

We must see whether it is possible for the black man to overcome his feeling of insignificance, to rid his life of the compulsive quality that makes it so like the behaviour of the phobic. Affect is exacerbated in the Negro, he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity. (1952/1986, p. 35)

Kojo actually tries to break this cycle by working in a corporation and trying to do everything by the book; however, when he comes to a dead-end, he seeks help from David, who is the embodiment of all the phobic behaviours of a black man.

As the name of the play suggests, Kojo and Sharon try to get “off the endz” in order to offer their unborn child a better life. Even though they managed to tastefully decorate their house, it does not change the fact that they are still living in the Council estate environment. Their desire to upgrade their lifestyle is so intense that they are ready to do everything at any cost. Therefore, they are not only spending more money than they are earning, but they are also trying to save up for a mortgage. That is why, the timing of Kojo’s unemployment is especially unfortunate. Their debts later become unmanageable for Kojo, which results in David convincing him to sell drugs in order to pay off his debts. The estate functions as a metaphorical box where the past keeps coming up to the surface and “inhabitants are trapped in an endless cycle, predetermined by their social status, race and location” (Beswick, 2014, p. 107). However, Sharon is determined to break this cycle; therefore, she and Kojo end their friendship at the end of the play as their drug dealing adventure almost costs Kojo his life. Sharon wants to offer their child a different life. As they are expecting a son, she does not want him to end up like David, or the other masculine figures she has known around her. At the beginning of the play, before the gender of the baby is known, David guesses it as a boy, but Sharon’s initial reaction is “I hope it’s not” (Agbaje, 2010, p. 9).

David also shows features of toxic masculinity when he interacts with women. He loses his temper immediately when he does not get the attention he expects from them. According to hooks, the “gansta persona” that black men undertake causes them to unintentionally maintain stereotypical racist and sexist patriarchal culture, and they direct most of their violence towards women, and mostly black women (2004). When David visits Kojo’s workplace, he immediately makes inappropriate remarks to the secretary, Keisha. He objectifies her by saying her “lips are so juicy” and asks her if she knew that she was sexy (Agbaje, 2010, p. 9). When he is ignored, he immediately becomes aggressive and defensive as he says “do you think you are better than me?” (2010, p. 10). His relationship with Sharon also reflects how David is a reflection of patriarchal masculinity. Even though Sharon is a nurse, who works irregular shifts, she

still finds herself cleaning after David all the time. When she asks for help, he responds “tidying up is a woman’s job” (p. 26). And even when Kojo helps his girlfriend, he makes fun of him by saying that he is whipped.

The similar attitude toward women can be seen in Ellams’ play *Barber Shop Chronicles*. In the sixth scene, we meet a new character called Muhammed, who is a Nigerian man in his thirties and he considers himself “a proper black man” (2017, p. 37). Once he enters the barber shop, he makes derogatory remarks about black women. He compares white women to black women and comes to conclusion that one should always choose white women. As for the reasons, he says that white woman does not ask for dowry and they are more free-spirited. He blames black women and their families for rejecting him instead of making an attempt to change the image of a stereotypical black man. Muhammed also keeps bragging about his active sexual life and claims that people call him “Mr Lover Lover” (2017, p. 28). This is another black patriarchal masculine image that resulted from black men’s suffering “so much dehumanization in the context of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, [and as a result] they have brought to the realm of the sexual a level of compulsion that is oftentimes pathological” (hooks, 2004, p. 69). They believe they reclaim their power even though this actually does not make them look powerful in people’s eyes. For example, in Muhammed’s case, we can see that no one even believes his stories and they make fun of him.

Unfortunately, this masculine image plays an important role in the lives of black men. If they want to survive or be a part of the society, they need to play the role of hyper-masculine black man exaggeratedly. Judith Butler states that;

Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated. (1988, p. 528)

In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, Ethan as a young black actor suffers the most from not mirroring the socially accepted image of a black man. He enters the barber shop, holding a script and looking really nervous. When Emmanuel, the owner of the shop, asks him the reason why he is nervous he says that he does not look the part he is auditioning for even though it is a black man. Ethan believes that he does not represent the socially accepted strong black masculinity. He says “I pluck my eyebrows, what’s that got to do with masculinity? I see guys in the gym, pumping, tryna look like muscular black rappers, asking themselves *Am I a man yet?*” (2017, p. 96). He believes that the real question should be “*Who am I?*”. He starts to question his real identity and whether he is a black man or a strong black man. Emmanuel tries to help him by asking questions about his family and it is understood that he was raised by his mother, never knew his father. When Ethan tries to unburden himself to his friends, the only reaction he gets from them is that he is acting like a girl and needs to man up. Emmanuel criticises the patriarchal masculine society and says “we who live outside our countries left because our leaders, our fathers failed us somehow, or the system was designed for us to fail. We’re not in our motherlands... motherless too. Maybe we’re all orphans here?” (2017, p. 99). Ethan is actually right about his concerns as he does not fit the image of the black man that mass media screens. As hooks states, the media teaches that “only the strong and the violent survive” (2004, p. 26) and that is not who Ethan is. Furthermore, hooks emphasizes how black men are exposed to the idea that they can never be successful in life if they pursue legal jobs. From a very young age, they are surrounded by glamorized violent patriarchal male figures who think that streets are their home and “gangsta culture is the essence of patriarchal masculinity” (2004, p. 26).

In Agbaje’s play *Off the Endz*, we can see that this image results in creating violent young gangsters. Reece, Gabriel and Kevin are aggressive young children and Agbaje describes them as menacing and hooded up, which is a very typical image of a violent black man. They accuse David and Kojo for trespassing and selling drugs in their territory (2010). David does not take their threat seriously, but Kojo feels uneasy and tries to step back. As David himself represents the older version of these youngsters, he becomes really aggressive and behaves like a gangster like them. As a result, it becomes Kojo who is unable to survive in this environment, not literally but

figuratively. Compared to David, he is less masculine and does not perform the part that gangster culture expects him to perform. Ikudiyasi in *Gone too Far!* experiences a similar situation. He is unable to eliminate himself from his Nigerian heritage and cannot adapt to street life in London. He is not as aggressive and violent as his brother Yemi, and for that reason, he is punished physically just like Kojo. In both situations, even though they are both marginalized by their community, their injuries help them to break the cycle of patriarchal masculinity. Kojo and Sharon leave the “endz” and Yemi finally embraces his culture and reconstructs his relationship with his brother, Ikudiyasi.

2.2. Women’s Solidarity in Agbaje and Ellams’ Plays

It is Bola Agbaje’s own personal experiences growing up that has inspired the main themes of her plays. She states that she did not encounter any discrimination for being a girl growing up; therefore, she never had to think about her gender. However, the fact that she was a black girl and different from others became apparent to her once she started her school life. The division between black girls and white girls became very obvious as they always hung out in separate groups. Once she decided to pursue her career in acting, she could not find any roles for herself. Even though she was aware of the fact that white women also struggled in the creative industry, as a black woman she struggled twice as hard. Therefore, she could not feel a sense of solidarity with white women as she states she felt really isolated (2015). In her plays, even though they are not primarily about women’s interaction with each other, Agbaje interprets problematic female relationships through various female characters and includes different friendship dynamics based on her own experiences.

Agbaje encountered various discriminations due to her race once she stepped into school life. As her own experiences inspire Agbaje’s plays, it would not be surprising to see the examples of discrimination she endured as a teenager. However, it would be unfair to put the blame on women for not establishing solidarity. It is actually the patriarchal society that forces women to be alienated from each other. They constantly compete with each other or try to manipulate each other to stand out in society. Acclaimed feminist writer Hélène Cixous states in her essay that:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. (p. 878)

Agbaje covered this issue in *Playing the Game*. It is a part of the collective project named *Women, Power and Politics: Now* where a group of female playwrights criticise the lack of representation of women in politics through five plays. Producer and director Indhu Rubasingham initiated this project as she wondered the reason behind the “obstacles that are preventing women from entering or gaining power within the political system in this country” (2010, p. 5). Agbaje mainly criticises how women prevent each other from challenging gender stereotypes. Akousa is a plain young girl, who is chosen to be a candidate for the head of Students’ Union by her flatmate Jenny and her sidekick Charlene. Jenny and Charlene try to impose a certain alluring image on her by “coaching her in sexy dancing, supplementing her body contours with gel pads, applying conspicuous makeup” (Kritzer, 2015, p. 138) and forcing her to dance in a seductive way for her campaign video. Unfortunately, the reason for their help during the campaign is not for women solidarity; on the contrary, Jenny and Charlene use Akousa’s weak economic position as a threat to control her in order to gain access to the budget that is allocated for the student union. However, the exploitation is mutual as Akousa also uses them to win the election and once she succeeds, she immediately moves out and becomes independent (Kritzer, 2015). Jenny is a problematic character as she is the embodiment of how society expects women to treat each other. She tries to manipulate her friends to get the money in the budget in order to have a plastic surgery. She is obsessed with her looks and throughout the play, we see her checking her reflection on the mirror and wearing gel pads to make her breasts look bigger (Agbaje, 2011). She believes that in order for a woman to be successful, she has to be beautiful. She is of the opinion that “sex sells” and states that Akousa “can be the first woman in politics to really make a difference. Being attractive and easy on the eye will get [her] everywhere” (p. 12). Akousa objects that women do not need to look like prostitutes to be successful in politics, and she gives Margaret

Thatcher as an example. However, Jenny contradicts her as she says “let’s not forget she only got in cos she looked like a bloke” (p. 12). She is not only harsh to Akousa, she also uses every opportunity to make fun of her sidekick, Charlene. Akousa’s motivation to win the student election is to be noticed, and to be taken seriously as a student. According to Jenny, the only way to achieve this is to become appealing to men.

Charlene and Jenny represent what is wrong in patriarchal society. These characters prove that Hélène Cixous was right about how men forced women to hate each other and made them think women are the enemy (1976). Charlene believes that women in general hate other pretty women and Jenny agrees with her. Jenny thinks that she has to endure the reaction from other women because they see her as a beautiful woman and a threat, and accuse her of being after their men. When Akousa’s campaign video draws the attention of men, they decide to tone down her image. They give her a natural look so that “women will see [her] and less threaten by [her] and then [she] will have their votes” (Agbaje, p. 16).

bell hooks also emphasizes the similar effect of sexism on women. She states that it teaches women to hate each other and women tend to reflect this hatred in their interaction with other women on a daily basis whether it is done purposely or unconsciously (1986). She also makes a further comment on the issue as she states “while sexism teaches women to be sex objects for men, it is also manifest when women who have repudiated this role feel contemptuous and superior in relation to those women who have not” (p. 129). This can be seen at the end of the play when Akousa uses Charlene and Jenny’s weakness and eventually outsmarts them. At first, she creates an image of a gullible woman who allows her friends to use her like a puppet, but later we witness her character development clearly as she raises her voice and refuses to be pushed about. When Akousa wins the election, her friends do not celebrate the victory properly even though they have accomplished something that they should be proud of. As soon as Akousa declares her plan to move out, Jenny reacts offensively and says “I can turn people against you. I built you up and I can tear you down in a heartbeat” (Agbaje, 2011, p. 19). Unfortunately, they are not able to form solidarity even though they have tried so hard to stand out in the society. They blame

each other even though they should direct their anger to the patriarchal society as the sole reason of their falling out.

Agbaje states in an interview that in *Gone too Far!* she wanted to include different friendship dynamics through Armani and Paris. Stereotypically, these types of characters are generally used as a source of joke; however, Agbaje wanted to twist this pattern as she gives them a voice (2021). Armani is a character who is trying to form an identity for herself as she has never met her Jamaican father and has been raised by her white mother. Just like Yemi, she is constantly aggressive and that is why they clash with each other. Paris has always helped and assisted Armani through her quest for identity. They show a good example of sisterhood at the beginning; however, that turns out to be a very fragile friendship because as soon as Paris conflicts with Armani, she immediately becomes aggressive and ignores everything Paris has done for her. Paris helped her braid her hair, taught her traditional food and dance moves as she sees in her a lost girl who does not know whether she belongs to the white side or the black side. Armani does not feel like she belongs anywhere, thus she immediately makes sexist and racist remarks about black women and says “Dark-skinned girls always have problems with light-skinned girls” (Agbaje, 2007, p. 37). She justifies her argument by saying that dark-skinned girls envy light-skinned girls’ skin colour and that is the reason why they always hate each other. Paris is aware of the fact that Armani’s racism and sexism come from her confusion as she has not established her own identity. Paris shows the audience that as a woman who is happy with herself, she is ready to support her female friend in need. Unfortunately, Armani is not at peace with herself and Paris understands her struggling as she states:

You don't know what to identify yourself with. Should you be on the white side, should you be on the black side – you don't know. You try and act like you're blacker dan [sic] anybody else, but then you contradict yourself cos you go on like it's a bad thing for me to look black, or anyone else at that. I've always been cool with myself and even cooler wid [sic] you. When other light-skinned girls have chatted shit bout you, I've been the one to defend your ass. But I'm the hater – cos I'm dark-skinned! You just don't get it. (p. 39)

This hatred can be the result of the racism embedded in the society. Consequently, black women have learnt to be resentful and competitive all the time (hooks, 1986) even though they share similar cultural backgrounds and they experience similar problems in the patriarchal society. They are the immigrants of the United Kingdom, who should unite to overcome being marginalized together. Even though the UK had received a great number of immigrants, one time thousands of Irish people for example, British people did not welcome non-white immigrants because they had considered the UK as a racially homogenous island. They did not believe black people fit in the Britishness and; therefore, black people could not feel a sense of belonging towards the nation (Pearce, 2017). Because of this lack of belonging, they have been unable to form an identity, and just like in Armani's case, they have become aggressive and racist to one and another. The main issue here is that Armani thinks the light skin is superior than the dark skin and this stereotype drives from how women of colour are perceived in society. Frantz Fanon states that black women in general are not accepted in the European state of mind and they receive exclusionary glances from white women all the time. Therefore, women of colour find the solution in Fanon's words "whiten the race, save the race" (1952/1986, p. 33). Fanon does not only talk about how black women are in quest of white men in order to be a part of the white world, he also talks about how they want to change everything that belonged to their culture and lactify themselves. Figuratively speaking, women want to bleach their body and their own mind to feel less inferior in the eyes of society. Under this light, Armani subconsciously feels superior than Paris, and every other dark skinned girls, as she has lighter skin which comes from her white mother. She even thinks she is complimenting people when she says that they do not look African.

While Agbaje criticizes the patriarchy by showing the lack of women solidarity in society in her plays, Ellams chooses the contrary path to show the importance of sisterhood as he includes strong female unity in his several works. In *the Half-God of Rainfall*, the audience witness a fascinating example of women's solidarity. It is an unusual and experimental play of Ellams, where he tackles with the Greek mythology and modern literature. Even though the narrative of the play looks extraordinary, the theme is very relatable and timeless. It focuses on Modupe and her son Demi, who was conceived when Zeus raped Modupe. The play starts with Modupe's mother seeking

protection for her daughter from all kinds of men both weak and strong. To protect her daughter, she asks help from another woman, the River Goddess Osún. As Modupe's mother herself suffered all kinds of violence from men before, she knows that she can only rely on another woman for such protection. At the beginning of the play, Ellams writes a brief dedication where he states "in solidarity with women who have spoken against or stood up to male abuses of power in all its forms" (p. 3). It is significant to see under this light the pact Modupe's mother and Osún made where they take an oath to protect Modupe and swear "no mortal man would know this child. No one will come near!" (p. 13). Osún has to train Modupe in order to protect her from threats, thus she teaches her how to fight and pretend to be a man. She knows that in order to survive in this patriarchal world, she has to conceal her true identity since women are perceived as fragile and weak creatures. Unfortunately, all turns out to be futile once Zeus has an eye for Modupe. As a result of their encounter, Demi is conceived, who is a half-Nigerian mortal and half-Grecian God.

Zeus represents all the toxic mentality of masculinity in society. He even feels threatened by Demi's increasing power and he feels weakened as Demi becomes stronger. At the first opportunity, he kills Demi and exclaims "Now, I'm complete" (p. 40). Every woman in the play felt the sorrow of Modupe when she loses her son. Even Hera, Zeus' wife, condemns the murder. Modupe wants to avenge her son; however, as a mortal she does not stand a chance against Zeus. But with the help of goddesses and other women, she is able to actually turn the tables against those who oppress women all the time. Just like in real society, women need to be in solidarity to create stronger resistance. hooks states that if women fail to unite, it is unlikely for them to bring an end to the oppression. Therefore, "women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity. Unless [they] can show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist, [they] cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole" (1986, p. 127). In fact, this unity actually works for Modupe and she defeats Zeus at the end. When his son Hercules begs her to spare Zeus' life, Modupe and her other female victims can only think about all the pains, scars and traumas he has caused. Therefore, he has to die in order to show all the men who think they have control over women that they are not entitled to women's bodies, and Zeus, "who is old as stars, thinks Earth spins for him. He will never learn" (Ellams,

2019a, p. 49). It is not surprising to see all these women join their forces together because, gender solidarity is the result of ongoing patriarchal violence, and coercive forms of heterosexuality influence men to feel entitled to abuse women either physically or mentally (Whitehead, 2009). Zeus is the embodiment of all the abusive aspects of heterosexuality and Ellams uses him to represent how women are perceived by those who hold the power given by the patriarchy. Through Medupe's story, Ellams shows that it is through solidarity that women may be able to overcome the oppression of the patriarchy.

Another example of female solidarity can be seen in *Three Sisters*. The play is an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's famous play with the same name. Michael Billington states in his review that Ellams shows the audience "a searing attack on British responsibility for the war dating to the time when they created Nigeria out of 250 ethnic groups and languages" (2019). Nigeria as the geographical area that we know today was actually founded by the British colonials in 1914 and indigenous people did not partake in the process. Therefore, people did not feel the sense of solidarity as they were attached to their local communities rather than to a people whom the world knows as Nigerians (Falola & Heaton, 2008). That is why it was difficult for them to unite after they became independent from the United Kingdom. Most prominent ethnicities in the area were Hausa/Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East. Their attempt to dominate the area where they were located was not very successful as "ethnic minorities often opposed the political domination of the large ethnic groups" (p. 159). Therefore, it was inevitable for the local people to feel left out from the changing political atmosphere. Consequently, they moved away from being a unified Nigerian nation and they were divided even further. Gaining independency caused them to become "a state without a nation" (p. 159). Not surprisingly, their lack of unity caused greater problems later on. There was a threat of domination as all the groups feared that upon taking over the government the group in power would subdue the others and take advantage of their superior position. Following these fears, unreliable elections took place in 1964 and 1965, which caused uneasiness and disorder in the area. Eventually, starting from 1966, Nigeria experienced a number of military coups. There was a constant tension within the state and attempts to ease this tension could not triumph. Eventually, Igbos and their

supporters in the East created their secessionist state of Biafra. This declaration of independency initiated a civil war which lasted from 1967 to 1970 between Nigeria and the state of Biafra and resulted in Biafra rejoining Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Ellams takes the audience to those times and covers the timeline between 1967 and 1970, which is before, during and after the Biafran Civil War. Ellams wanted to bring British audience to a place he is the most familiar with, hence the play is set in Nigeria. He does not identify himself as Black British; therefore, he does not feel qualified enough to discuss the Black British experience (National Theatre, 2020). He was inspired by his own sisters while he was writing this play, and he also wrote himself into the play through the brother named Dimgba, who is always made fun of by his sisters. Ellams states in an interview with Joy Joses that “there are parallels between [his] family dynamic and the way they all relate to each other” (2019). In the play, there is a strong solidarity between the three sisters who are longing for their home and life back in Lagos. However, they are all stuck in a small village in Owerri, and they are not able to take an action to fulfil their desire. Even though they are more outspoken and stronger characters than the men around them, they are always limited by the male characters they encounter. Lolo, who is the oldest sister of the family and a teacher, wants to renovate the syllabus they teach at school and create a better future for the children but is unable to actualize her plan as she is not taken seriously by Biafra’s board of education, even when she becomes the headmistress. Nne Chukwu, the middle sister, who has been forced to marry Onyinchukwu at a very young age, feels trapped in her marriage, and finally, there is Udo, the youngest sister, who is full of potential, but unfortunately, her life ends before it starts when one of her suitors, Igwe, kills her husband-to-be Nmeri, which prevents her from going back to Lagos.

Throughout the play, sisters support and motivate each other when they cannot see a future and when they feel trapped. At the end, when all of their hopes vanish, they comfort each other. After Nmeri passes away, Udo feels devastated and Nne Chukwu says “we can start again, out here, find a new house, make a new home, just three of us” (2019b, p. 117). All their sufferings are caused by men. For instance, their brother Dimgba loses their house because of his gambling debts, and when Nne Chukwu describes her marriage with Onyinyenchukwu, she says she feels trapped and

“[her] spirit is caged in [her]” (p. 93). Lolo is more sophisticated and conscious as an educator compared to Onyinyenchukwu, who is another teacher at the school where she works. She suggests him to read a book that criticizes what is happening in Nigeria, but Onyinyenchukwu refers to it as “heavy stuff” (p. 28). She wants to change the syllabus in order to teach accurate information to the children. However, when she eventually becomes the headmistress, she is forced to teach the old syllabus as the officials do not allow her to make any alterations.

Women’s role in the time of war is very significant. During the Biafran War, the sisters play active roles in their community. Lolo wants to set an example to her students by teaching them not to respond to anything with violence and she tries to make fundamental changes with the syllabus of the school so that there will be no more civil wars in the future. When the play moves forward to three years into the Biafran war, we see that all the sisters try to physically help the poor and wounded. Ellams wanted to show the war through the eyes of these three sisters because as Spike Peterson states “the significance of [women’s] contributions remains ‘hidden’ and therefore unanalysed in conventional accounts” (p. 45). Therefore, when they unite their forces, they can overcome every conflict and drama that are caused by men.

Whatever they experience, the sisters always manage to stand together and form a strong solidarity. Therefore, they manage to find solace even in the darkest moment. However, they are not always so welcoming to other women in the play. Their attitude towards their brother’s wife Abosede is very mean. Billington states that the reason behind the sisters’ hostility is not generated from their snobbery, in fact, it is motivated by a political reason as they think that “they belong to the dominant Igbo ethnic group, while she is a Yorùbá” (2019). For instance, Nne Chukwu makes fun of her outfit and questions Dimgba’s taste as she states “The things she wears! Chineke! She mixes and matches fabrics that have no business being beside each other. Dimgba doesn’t love her, he is just confused by the colours. Seriously, what does he see in her” (Ellams, 2019b, p. 22). And Nne Chukwu even calls Abosede a “bush animal” (p. 62). As Abosede cannot be a part of the sisterhood and she remains an outsider, she easily abandons her husband’s family and convinces her husband to sell everything. This constitutes an example of what bell hooks talks about when she states that “contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women’s rights

because [they] did not see ‘womanhood’ as an important aspect of [their] identity” (1982, p. 1). For the sisters, racial identity seems to have prominence over gender identity. Therefore, they fail to constitute a form of unity with their sister-in-law. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes this type of discrimination as an example of intersectionality, which is a term when gender discrimination and race discrimination merge into one another (Lafayette College, 2015). Abosede is discriminated against not just for being a woman, but also because she is regarded as someone from an inferior race. If she were not marginalized by the sisters from the beginning, she could form a closer relationship with them and support them through the hard times. As Crenshaw states “through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (1991, p. 1299).

2.3. Gender Nonconformity in Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams’ Plays

Inua Ellams always talks about gender roles and he states that he does not fit in the idea of “a typical man” (TEDx, 2016) and he continues by adding that he does not think there exists one form of a man. As he has three sisters, when he was growing up, he always spent time with them and played with their dolls and sewed dresses for them. He did not spend his childhood like his peers; therefore, his idea of a typical man is different from the conventional one. And in his plays, Ellams chooses to write about masculinity and what it means to be a man (TEDx, 2016).

If we deem it possible to comment that a man possesses “masculine characteristics” when making a comparison within the “category of being a man”, Judith Butler questions why then men are accused of leaving the invisible boundaries of this category when they act in ways that are considered feminine (1999). Having written Dimgba character for himself as a weak character in *Three Sisters*, Inua Ellams states that the choice of the character’s name is intentional and in contrast with the personality of the character, since it is an Igbo name which means “a renowned wrestler” (Onumajuru, 2016), and as the only man in the family, Dimgba should be the patriarchal figure of the house. However, Dimgba actually is one of the weakest characters in the play. He does not fit the typical definitions of how a man should act. His older sister, Udo, comments on his character as she says “I don’t know what kind

of man Dimgba is, [...] We all ran out to help when the bombs fell but he stayed in his room, playing that trumpet. He is so lost” (Ellams, 2019b, p. 90). He is constantly afraid of facing others, and for this reason, he avoids everyone and hides in his room. He only communicates with his uncle, Eze, and confesses how he feels inadequate as a son to his late father. He says that “I’m glad Papa isn’t alive. He would be so disappointed” (p. 81). Ellams emphasizes the insignificance of the character throughout the play as the times when he leaves or enters the scene always go unnoticed.

In plays by both Agbaje and Ellams, the characters who do not acknowledge the nationalist ideas of their race are always regarded as outsiders. The concepts of race and sex have become so intertwined with one another that it is not surprising to see when the characters choose not to abide by the gender roles assigned to them by the society, they are immediately marginalised. Rita from Bola Agbaje’s play *Belong* suffers the most from this set of mind. While she tries to resume her life in London, where she developed a sense of belonging, her nationalist Nigerian mother-in-law constantly criticises her for not being the wife she thinks her son deserves.

In *Belong*, the setting of the play is relatively different from Bola Agbaje’s previous plays. The protagonist Kayode, who is a British Nigerian politician, eager to be a member of parliament, faces backlash because of his aggressive attitude toward his black opponent and black community in general. The play starts right after Kayode losing the election and continues with him trying to get away from all the chaos he caused in London. He decides to visit Nigeria but this short visit turns into a return migration as he finds himself in the middle of the local politics. As Michael Billington states in his review, Bola Agbaje presents us the concept of a “sense of belonging” in different forms. There is Kayode’s wife Rita, who identifies herself as a British woman, and does not feel like she belongs to Nigeria at all, and also there is Fola, their friend from Nigeria, who perseveringly believes that Nigeria is the land of limitless possibilities and every Nigerian in the United Kingdom should eventually return to their homeland. Our protagonist Kayode on the other hand, feels somewhere in between (2012) as he constantly tries to “battle with fixed binary notions of identity” (Ekumah-Asamoah, 2015, p. 137). Nigerian people do not see him as a real Nigerian since he tries to bring the British set of mind to Nigeria; however, when he speaks

Yoruba, he is immediately accepted by the local people. It can be inferred that being torn between these identities reflects Agbaje's own "relationship with Nigeria and also highlights the inevitable contentions between the continent and the diaspora" (p. 129). Stuart Hall defines the diaspora experience "by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (1989, p. 235). Kayode fully experiences diaspora; however, he fails to accept his both identities. Therefore, he struggles with establishing a sense of identity.

Rita and Fola are characters who are strategically placed in Kayode's life. Fola is a very nationalist character, who abides by all the gender roles of the Nigerian society, while Rita is a second generation immigrant, who belongs to Britain and has no connection with Nigeria. Once Fola re-enters her life, she immediately criticises her domestic skills. She says "you are the lady of the house, it is your job to keep the place clean" (Agbaje, 2012, p. 7) and she should be ashamed if a guest comes and sees the house in that state. Another issue that she keeps bringing up is that Rita and Kayode's choice of not having a baby. In this case, according to Fola it is not a mutual agreement, instead it must be solely Rita's decision. This pregnancy topic comes up on many occasions. For instance, Fola harshly criticises her appearance as she makes negative remarks about her body and how she put on so much weight. She says that "a woman needs to keep her shape for her man" (p. 9). Fola also hints that there must be a health issue that prevents them from getting pregnant and when Rita tells her she is able to have children, Fola accuses her for being selfish. In the eyes of the society, a woman must be physically incapable of getting pregnant as it is not possible for a man not to want a child. A woman has to have a child and Fola is surprised that their marriage still lasts. She says "only God knows how you managed to keep a man for so long" (p. 41). Even though, Fola herself is not married, it is not because she wants to be independent, it is because she is "waiting for the right man to find [her]" (p. 41). She also says that once she gets married, she plans to get pregnant with six months.

Kayode's mother, who is referred as Mama in the play, and Rita do not have a loving relationship and Rita gives the hint of that at the beginning of the play. She says his mother accuses her for putting a curse on his son as she thinks Rita is the only reason of her son being in London, not in Nigeria. Also she does not follow the

conventional roles of a wife; therefore, it is not surprising to see that she favours Fola more than her daughter-in-law. When Fola and Rita both go to Nigeria, Mama greets Fola with open arms and says “my daughter! You are looking well!” (p. 60), on the other hand, Rita is not welcomed and Mama rolls her eyes for every action she does. As Mama is a very nationalist figure, it is not surprising to see that she does not feel a kind of attachment towards her because she does not have children and nationalist ideas place a high value on motherhood and sees female sexuality that does not result in children as potentially dangerous for the nation (Summers, 2002). Therefore, Mama’s disregarding Rita comes from her nationalist beliefs, as long as she is in her son’s life, Kayode cannot be a true Nigerian. In line with what Summers and Ekumah-Asamoah say, the nationalistic ideals held by Mama reflects on her strong beliefs with regards to gender roles in the society and her objection showed by her attitude towards Rita as she violates these roles.

As Ellams prefers talking about gender roles and being a man, it is not surprising to see him giving attention to gay men and the problems that Nigerian gay men experience. His monodrama *Black T-Shirt Collection* is about two foster brothers, who are T-shirt entrepreneurs. They are Nigerian; however, they are from different religions. Muhammed, as his name suggests, is a Muslim origin, while his foster brother Matthew is a Christian. Ellams describes the brothers as he states “Matthew is quiet, a typical artist, T-shirt designer, all pencils and pens; Muhammed is charismatic, the salesman” (2012, p. 15). They embark on their journey when Muhammed is caught kissing another man in a bathroom by a journalist. As they are becoming well-known entrepreneurs in Nigeria, news of Muhammed’s incident immediately spreads around. It forces them to escape their hometown and start living in Egypt, where they carefully hide their pasts and eventually they expand their business worldwide. As Nigeria is a very conservative country, homosexual individuals do not only face legal punishments, but also they are under the threat of public violence. Therefore, brothers choose to run away in order to protect themselves and their family. Their exile lasts many years and unfortunately it does not end happily. Summers explains that the nationalist homophobic ideology originates from patriarchal set of mind. If one cannot produce children, they are a threat to the nation. This relates to “the same overarching rationale about reproduction that situates gays and lesbians as outcasts and anticitizens

who are unworthy of the protection of the state” (2002, p. 22). As Muhammed does not fit in the norms of patriarchal society, he is doomed to be punished by them. He chooses not to abide by their stereotypical gender roles, and as a result, he can be whoever he wants to be when he moves to London. For instance, in Uganda, where views towards homosexual rights are similar to those in Nigeria, being homosexual is illegal. In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, Ellams shows how Ugandan people can actually object to this perception regarding this issue, as he derived his characters from his real life observations in barbershops from many countries. When Simon supports a gay couple, Brian gets angry and states “Why are you defending the gay? This is not natural to Uganda” (2017, p. 35). Being gay is not in accordance with the idea of being a man; therefore, it is not considered to be natural. London becomes home for the gay people who have to hide their true gender identities as they are not accepted in their hometown. Simon reveals this problem when he says:

It’s happening everywhere, so it’s natural it’ll happen here! Kwame who visited last week? That Ghanaian businessman? He just settled in London, I wanted to do business with him but he says Ugandan exports face discrimination because we’re attacking the gay, so now it’s bad for business. Just grow up! Leave the gay alone, it’s not your problem. (p. 35)

Judith Butler states “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender: that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” (1999, p. 33). Inua Ellams tries to redefine black masculinity as he has an unorthodox way of writing his male characters. In *Barber Shop Chronicles*, when the young actor, Ethan, complains about the way people see him, he states “I pluck my eyebrows, what’s got to do with masculinity? I see guys in the gym, pumping, tryna [sic] look like muscular black rappers, asking themselves ‘Am I a man yet?’” and to that Emmanuel responds “It comes down to personal definition” (2017, p. 96). Ethan feels the burden of gender identity that is imposed on him. The role models that come before him are beyond his reach as he feels he cannot be like any of them. He expresses his despair as he says “Mandela, Martin, Malcolm, Marcus... they are legends, titans, country-sized men. Compared to them we’re islands” and asks “if a man is an island, is he still a man?” (p. 98). He feels lost within the definition of

stereotypical man. However, Gayatri Spivak explains the issue of gender as a very fluid term:

Gender can be the name of the tendency toward the spectral which produces the effect of the empirical, whose name can be sex. Indeed, it is the empirical that makes explicit the mysteriousness of being-human, for it claims the field of production, makes difference felt as identity, necessity as freedom, keeping spectrality under control. Today 'sex' names the part of the empirical well—it is a noun rich in variations of meaning. Ordinary language gives it an unconventional dimension of the performative, to have it is to do it. My point has been that the idea of a sex-gender system does not obliterate this peculiar rhythm. (2006, p. 4)

Ethan is under the illusion of having to conform to all the gender roles that society attributes to him. When he does not abide by them, he feels despair and this feeling of despair eventually causes people like Ethan to feel lost. Muhammed in *Black T-Shirt Collection* escaped from his country in order to survive. However, escaping does not give him inner peace since he constantly questions his true identity. As an intersectional character, he is not discriminated for just being a black man. His struggles in trying to be a part of the society multiplies because of the intersectionality of his identity as a Muslim and gay black man as Crenshaw points out “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (1989, p. 140). When Matthew tells Muhammed that he can be himself if he does not return to Nigeria, Muhammed tells him that he did not know who he was. He states:

I'm tired of, ticking boxes, I'm gay, I'm an ex-pat, I'm African, I'm a black African, I'm Hausa, I'm Nigerian O! Muslim, this one, that one... journalists asking stupid questions 'What's it like to be... I DON'T KNOW! I just want to be a man again eh? Where people look like us, talk like us, No labels, no colour, no shirts, nothing. (2012, p. 45)

Unfortunately, he cannot return because the solution is actually not in his hometown. Judith Butler states “Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy” (1999, p. 531); however, one is always punished if they do not follow the

script or if they try to be out of the ordinary. Gender cannot be imposed on individuals; it emerges naturally through performance. Muhammed suffers from not being the man patriarchy expects him to be. His punishment is that he cannot go back to his country. Therefore, he is doomed to this feeling of alienation. This might be the reason why Ellams chooses to kill this character at the end of the play because he wants to show how he will never feel the sense of belonging as he does not conform to the gender roles that his Nigerian culture imputes to him.



CONCLUSION

The United Kingdom has been receiving a great number of non-white immigrants since the post-war period. As it was a very racially homogenous country in the past, the UK did not welcome those non-white immigrants at first, thinking that black people did not fit their idea of nation. Once a colony of the United Kingdom, Nigeria shared many connections with the United Kingdom. Their official language is similar and their education system has many similarities. Therefore, Britain has been a preferred destination for the Nigerians, and especially Nigerian students. Despite their current similarities and shared history, Britain did not welcome Nigerians with open arms. Being a member of the Commonwealth of Nations did not bring any privileges to the Nigerians. On the contrary, they faced discrimination and racism throughout the years. The main reason behind this marginalization was that Nigerians, or black immigrants in general, created a threat for the British people as the power balance was shifting and they were losing their superiority over these nations. This led black immigrants to feel isolated and alienated, eventually the African diaspora emerged in the UK to connect immigrants with their homelands. They tried to form themselves a new home for which literature provided the foundation in this far away land.

Theatre has always been believed to reflect the political atmosphere and it invites the audience to have an inner journey by presenting the problems of the society and pushes them to think about these circumstances. Many playwrights committed themselves to represent the minority groups, and black artists generally focused on their experience and the sense of identity. Some of the most influential black playwrights who played a great role at establishing black British drama are Errol John, Barry Reckord and Wole Soyinka. They became very inspirational figures for the subsequent playwrights.

Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams are two 21st century British playwrights of Nigerian origin. They represent the experiences of the Nigerian diaspora in the United Kingdom as they are closely connected to both countries. They focus on the conflicts of people who were torn between two countries. They do not feel the sense of belonging to either country as they are too alienated to feel any connection. Inua

Ellams chooses to take the audience back to Nigeria and many other places where he feels more comfortable. On the other hand, Agbaje, having been inspired by Wole Soyinka, chooses to focus primarily on immigrants and racism that these immigrants encounter in the diaspora. However, both of the playwrights write themselves into the plays and show the Western audience the struggles they experience as black people in a European country.

Bola Agbaje and Inua Ellams approach the gender issue differently. Agbaje's works cannot be limited to women's problems. She talks about her own experiences, but as a black woman herself, she cannot avoid talking about women's problems. However, in terms of gender, Inua Ellams chooses more direct approach. His works are primarily about gender roles and the burden of representation. As a black man, during his childhood and adolescence, he was expected to behave in such a certain way; therefore, he struggled a lot to form his own identity.

The gender theme in this thesis is analysed under three subheadings, the first of which is hypermasculinity. Hypermasculinity is an identity symptom that most black men suffer from as this leads them also into toxic masculinity. Inua Ellams directly approaches this issue in *Barber Shop Chronicles* and tries to redefine masculinity. This play is in fact derived from his own experiences and observations around the world. He wanted to show how this hypermasculine image pushes young black men to question their own identity through an example of an eighteen-year-old actor. Also, Ellams shows how older generations blame the West for encouraging young men to behave in such overly masculine way. Bola Agbaje, on the other hand, does not explicitly include this topic in her plays but her characters inevitably show hypermasculine personalities. Agbaje focuses on the identity issue which results from a sense of not belonging anywhere. Yemi from *Gone too Far!* and David from *Off the Endz* are the examples of how society expects black men to behave. For Yemi, hypermasculinity is used as a way of hiding his vulnerability but for David, it is used as a way to survive in the society where he is pushed to feel insignificant.

Women solidarity in particular is another topic that Ellams focuses on. He even dedicates *The Half-God of Rainfall* to women who stand up against all the male abuses. With the help of women, Medupe, who is a mortal, fights and kills Zeus, the ultimate

patriarchal figure. Ellams shows that through solidarity, there is nothing women cannot achieve. They can even overcome patriarchal oppression as long as they can form a strong unity. In *Three Sisters*, the strong bond between the sisters helps them to overcome every trauma, including a civil war. They are strong characters with ambition; however, they are not as welcoming to an outsider the way they are to each other. Abosede's marginalization can be explained through intersectionality, since their feeling of superiority overcomes their sense of solidarity. Agbaje, on the other hand, presents female characters whose lack of solidarity results from the way patriarchy expects them to behave. Characters in *Playing the Game* prevent each other from challenging the patriarchal stereotypes. They are constantly arguing and trying to alter each other's personalities in order to achieve their goal. In *Gone too Far!* even though there are only a few female characters, Armani and Paris cannot form any type of unity. Paris tries to approach Armani while Armani subconsciously or consciously thinks she is superior than her as she has lighter skin. This opinion comes from how society sees black women.

Characters who do not conform to the stereotypical gender roles and their experiences are visible in both playwrights' works. However, it is more apparent in Ellams' plays. As Ellams does not see himself abiding by these roles, he includes characters like himself in his plays and Dimgba in *Three Sisters* is one of them. Ellams and Agbaje show how their characters are marginalized when they do not follow the norms of the society. Dimgba cannot keep his family together, and Muhammed's life in *Black T-Shirt Collection* is all about intersectional experiences as a Muslim black gay man. Rita in Agbaje's *Belong* is not able to keep her family together as she does not follow the gender roles. She is immediately marginalized by people who have a traditional mindset.

This thesis shows how two playwrights of similar background, a black man and a black woman of Nigerian origin, approach the issue of gender within the racial challenges. Their experiences as immigrants in the United Kingdom are generally reflected in their works. Coming from Nigeria, they both encountered similar stereotypical discrimination regarding their genders, yet they choose to reflect their experiences differently in their works. Inua Ellams chooses to directly point out gender struggles and issues which are experienced by both males and females and he even

sometimes neglects racial factor. Bola Agbaje mostly chooses to intersperse the theme of gender throughout her plays without making it her own primary focus as she chooses to talk about black experience.



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