



Choreographing Change: Analyzing Female Empowerment in

Irene Isoken Salami's *More Than Dancing*

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Abstract

More Than Dancing by Irene Salami-Agunloye is an excellent study of female empowerment and how society changes in today's African theater. The study focuses on how the play tests and challenges patriarchal structures by using both real and symbolic movements. Salami-Agunloye provides engaging female characters which allows his story to oppose outdated gender norms and promote new roles for men and women. Using cultural roots together with modern feminist ideas, the play celebrates the strong and united nature of women. This paper looks at empowerment, resistance and changes in society, looking at how art can oppose oppression and suggest new ways for people to behave.

Keywords: *Choreography, agency, female empowerment, resistance.*

I. Introduction

Irene Isoken Salami (1958-) is a prominent Nigerian playwright known for her poignant and unflinching works that challenge the marginalized and oppressed narratives in society. Salami's *More Than Dancing* (2003) serves as a poignant testament to the numerous challenges women of African descent confront in their quest for self-actualization and belonging. Her nuanced exploration of racial, cultural and gender dynamics resonates profoundly with Obioma Nnaemeka's conceptualization of Nego Feminism. This African feminist framework eschews aggression, instead advocating a path defined by collaboration, mutual understanding, and the delicate balancing of gendered interests. As Nnaemeka asserts, Nego Feminism's central aim is to address

emerging calls for gender equality in Nigeria. Likewise, *More Than Dancing* by Salami is a progressive narrative about Nego Feminism, adding dance as part of the storyline unlike other theatrical scripts. The way Salami uses characters to describe societal problems and difficulties and to emphasize the self-reliance of women is metaphorical.

Obioma Nnaemeka introduced the concept of Nego Feminism in 1999 as a critical alternative to established feminist theories such as Marxist, radical, and liberal feminisms. She argued that these traditional approaches tend to be confrontational and have not effectively achieved gender justice. Nego feminism emphasizes negotiation and compromise, reflecting the cultural values embedded in many African societies. This approach seeks harmony between matriarchal and patriarchal structures through collaboration, dialogue, and reconciliation rather than forceful opposition. By addressing the effects of patriarchal customs, Nego Feminism aims to dismantle oppressive systems through constructive conversation rather than direct confrontation (pp.22-29).

Salami-Agunloye's work is situated within the context of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. The play critiques the cultural norms that limit women's participation in political decision-making, highlighting how these norms perpetuate inequality. The play underscores the importance of women's involvement in political processes, advocating for a more inclusive political landscape.

II. Literature review

This study analyzes Irene Salami's *More Than Dancing* from the perspective of African feminist performance, exploring its theoretical underpinnings and placing it within significant discussions on dance, gender, and societal transformation. This review consolidates five fundamental areas of research—Nego-feminism, African dance studies, embodied cultural memory, postcolonial feminist critiques, and empirical studies of dance as agency—to create a solid foundation for analyzing Salami's work.

Nego Feminism as a Foundational Concept

Obioma Nnaemeka's innovative expression of Nego-feminism highlights negotiation, cooperation, and context-aware approaches in African feminist practice (Nnaemeka, 2004). Nego-feminism emphasizes communal unity and

diplomatic interaction as pathways for gradual social change, steering clear of confrontational approaches that may lead to cultural alienation. Salami's story reflects this principle by illustrating female characters who navigate power within patriarchal limitations instead of completely dismissing established norms, effectively implementing Nnaemeka's theoretical framework.

African Dance as a Socio-Political Activity

Research on African choreography emphasizes dance's dual role in cultural preservation and political commentary. Welsh-Asante (1996) claims that traditional movement forms embody collective memory while adapting to modern resistance environments, framing dance as a "living archive" of community identity. Building on this viewpoint, Taylor (2003) presents the concept of the "repertoire," suggesting that performance—via physical enactment—conveys history beyond written materials. Collectively, these studies offer the conceptual frameworks to examine Salami's choreographic motifs as both vessels of African heritage and sparks for feminist opposition.

Embodied Cultural Remembrance and Expression

Drawing from dance studies, postcolonial research emphasizes the connection among memory, performance, and authority. Taylor's (2003) embodied repertoire highlights how performances challenge fixed archives live, whereas Welsh-Asante (1996) shows that dance brings to life overlooked stories. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor argues that somatic knowledge "obliterates divisions between past and present," allowing performers to examine historical wrongs through movement. This framework is essential for uncovering how Salami's staging and dialogue weave together individual and shared histories to confront patriarchal legacies.

Postcolonial Feminist Evaluations

Ifi Amadiume's foundational research highlights the connection between native matriarchal customs and colonial authority dynamics in Nigeria (Amadiume, 1987). She cautions that if culturally rooted strategies are not employed, feminist movements may unintentionally reinforce exclusionary hierarchies. Simidele Dosekun (2019) complicates matters by pluralizing African feminisms, arguing that various regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic settings produce multiple "feminisms" instead of a singular movement. Salami's *More*

More Than Dancing addresses these tensions by orchestrating negotiations that utilize communal connections while revealing possible co-optation, echoing Dosekun's appeal for contextual subtleties.

Empirical Studies of Dance and Agency

Recent case studies illustrate how performance methods convert feminist theory into lived practice. Odi (2018) explores how Nigerian drama utilizes women's stories to challenge educational and economic obstacles, highlighting similarities with Salami's character-focused scenes. Olayinka (2023) identifies dance academies as "supportive environments for women's freedom," where artistry cultivates leadership abilities and economic independence. These results highlight the transformative power of choreographed environments, supporting the claim that Salami's play employs embodied movement to foster individual empowerment and collective unity.

Gaps and Contributions

Although there has been significant research, there remain gaps in understanding how choreographed negotiation in performance results in actual policy or institutional changes. Nego feminism outlines tactical routes for gradual advancements, but practical research seldom monitors results extending beyond mere symbolic representation. Salami's *More Than Dancing* provides a chance to connect this gap by portraying negotiation as both a performative action and a precursor to fundamental change. This study seeks to clarify how African feminist performance can bring about lasting social change by combining Nnaemeka's theoretical perspectives with the frameworks of Welsh-Asante and Taylor, as well as the critiques from Amadiume and Dosekun.

III. Methodology.

This paper analyzes the play by Salami, *More Than Dancing*, which was presented in a context-sensitive framework, based on Nego feminism interpretive context and the African context with emphasis on the roles of women in patriarchal societies. Having conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, the study criticises through close readings of character interactions, choreographic motif, and dialogue. Information is extracted directly out of the play and is complemented with critical reviews concerning African feminist performance and dance theories written by scholars. A coding schema groups

examples of resistance, agency and negotiation to identify the manner in which embodied motions act as social commentary. The comparative analysis contextualizes these findings on wider dynamics of circulations of postcolonial feminist discourses including convergences and tensions of the radical feminist praxis. The approach guarantees the transparency of the analysis as it implies the clear description of the analytical process initial coding, the organization of themes in groups, and it cross-validates with the existing theoretical frameworks. Finally, the methodology makes it possible to explore on a more subtle level how *More Than Dancing* approaches negotiation and solidarity as potentially transformative tactics within the socio-cultural environment that the play develops, and how the integration of art, gender and social change come into play. Findings are triangulated with peer-reviewed studies on the African dance practice and the feminist leadership models and, therefore, have the aspects of rigour in the research.

IV. Textual Analysis

a. Dance as Negotiation

The play tells the story of creative position change for women and their aspirations of shifting their place in society through dance despite the constraints that force them to be submissive and obedient. Through the use of cultural methods and contemporary feminist ideals, Salami presents female characters as the ones who bring about change, redefining their positions and creating chances for self –empowerment. This paper explores how *More Than Dancing* turns a critical lens on patriarchal culture and calls for social change among women. Dance and gender together become the focal points for the representation of African women and their culture. Salami’s work provides a fresh analysis of how popular cultural dances transform into agents of emancipation of postcolonial African women. Drawing on dance as a physical and as a conceptual model, Salami navigates the themes of female empowered choice and sovereignty, and cultural rebellion against the patriarchy (Hester, 2018.p. 22).

The role of this paper is to present female emancipation through the prism of dancing and at the same time question the traditional Western understanding of women’s position in African societies. The work of Salami

differs from the traditional literary works on the emancipation of women and focuses on the concept of dancing which is as represented by Ngugi (2023) for a critical review, as “symbolizing change across the physical, social, and political framework of a society” (p.45).

More Than Dancing interrogates patriarchal norms and promotes female empowerment. We will also explore the use of dance as a vehicle for resistance and societal transformation, examining the interplay of cultural traditions and feminist ideologies in the play’s narrative. By focusing on the thematic and symbolic significance of choreography, the study sheds light on how art functions as a medium for social critique and transformation. To achieve our objectives, this study employs a thematic analysis of the play, focusing on its narrative structure, character dynamics, and choreographic elements. A comparative framework situates the work within broader postcolonial feminist and cultural discourses, referencing critical analyses of African theater and feminist theory. This methodological approach provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the play’s layered narrative and cultural significance.

b. Choreography of Resistance

Dance, in its essence, is both personal and political. It expresses identity, defiance, and collective resistance. Dancing is “to move one’s body rhythmically, usually to music or to engage in or perform a dance” (Hester, 2018, p. 4). Western feminism, while having advanced gender equality in many ways, has also been critiqued for imposing a universalized perspective on women's issues, sometimes overlooking cultural differences. Dance becomes a tool for questioning these assumptions, especially in contexts where movement and embodiment serve as counter-narratives to dominant feminist discourses. For example, traditional and indigenous dance forms often challenge Western feminist ideas of autonomy and liberation. Many non-Western societies integrate dance into communal rituals, emphasizing collective empowerment over individualistic freedom. There’s also the political use of dance in protests, where movement symbolizes resistance. Dance became a space for reclaiming cultural identity and resisting oppression (Hester, 2018, p. 42).

In contemporary feminism, Right now, dance is still seen as a meaningful way for women to protest and explore their own feelings. One Billion Rising is such movement that shows how moving your body can actually stand up against gender-based violence. These days, feminist choreographers talk about acceptance of different bodies, queer identity and social matters using dance, challenging the standard ideas of feminism. It isn't just drama; dance also helps singers and people who protest. Using strong images of characters, a repressive system and the effort to break free, *Animals Farms* deeply embodies resistance. The author introduces herself as a writer who focuses on describing how women were oppressed and on their path to freedom. Dance shows the backgrounds it comes from, as each type shares its own set of narratives. Different dancers use different techniques and expressions, even if they tell different stories, yet they always represent human experience. In the modern world, movement as storytelling protects our culture and also opens doors to new possibilities ahead. (Hester, 2023, p. 44)

Among the productions on current African theatre, Salami's *More Than Dancing* should be regarded as an experimental play that challenges the logic of patriarchy and liberates women. When the play was written, Nigerian society was beginning to demand women's rights. The main storyline depicts a set of women who rise against their oppression in a society that seek to confine them to silence and acceptance of their subdued status.

The play begins with Madam Bisi, leader of the women's wing of the United People's Liberation Party challenging the tradition of seeing women merely as dancers at political rallies and party functions while the men occupy every position of relevance in the party hierarchy. She stops the dancing and drumming and reminds the women of their rights to participate actively in politics alongside the men, instead of playing second fiddle to the men all the time. She puts it bluntly:

Stop the drumming! Stop dancing!! Stop immediately. Stop I say!!!

Enough of the dancing! Enough is enough!! Year in, Year in, year out, primaries come and party elections go, all we do is dance. Is dancing all we can do? Is that all we are meant for? ... Look at the high table (points at the top row where the dignitaries are seated). How many

women do you see up there? ... For heaven's sake, women, this is not the time to dance. Stop dancing. Go back to your homes. Think about your future. Think about the future of your daughters. For how long must we be denied our constitutional rights? ... We must wake up from our complacency.(Salami,2003,p.1)

Salami's *More Than Dancing* delves into the struggles women face in Nigerian politics and their fight for fair representation. The story follows Madam Bisi, a determined activist challenging the male-dominated leadership of the fictitious United People's Liberation Party. In response, a group of women rallies together to nominate Professor Nona Odaro as their presidential candidate, despite attempts by men to undermine their efforts, Nona and her supporters remain steadfast, inspired by the legacy of strong women throughout history. Ultimately, Nona perseveres through continuous opposition, securing her place as the party's nominee and eventually becoming president. The play underscores the idea that women are not merely sidelined but fully deserving of influential political roles. Through its portrayal of resilient and courageous protagonists, Salami defies patriarchal norms and advocates for gender equality in political leadership. (Wadinga, W., & Songden, 2021, p.38)

As a result, Salami's work is seen as clearly reflecting Nego Feminism's practical mix of promoting gender equality and keeping indigenous traditions. In Salami's life, we discover the many layers of the African diaspora and also find routes to self-worth and belonging as they relate to Venda culture and traditions. The play represents an effort to highlight women's empowerment through what's known as Nego feminism, yet it does not fully show what this means. Using a fictional version of a Nigerian village, the author hopes to promote a distinctive feminism based on age-old tradition and mutual respect. However, Salami may reduce and simplify the main points of Nego feminism's challenge (pp. 46-47)

Amina's dreams of being a dancer which face opposition for women in her culture turn her into a strong representative of Nego feminism. Being inspiring on an individual level, her steps still do not really explore or address the big systemic reasons for women not being able to act with control in society. While

Amina's disobedient actions help her friends briefly discover themselves, all of her steps are strictly limited by what patriarchy outlines for women.

By basically portraying Nego feminism as a matter of one-on-one support, Salami ignores the movement's real focus on large-scale equality changes. Which Net Worth provides a look at tradition, identity and self-expression, yet does not question the cultural factors that contribute to gender injustice. Instead of standing up against the patriarchy, Amina's victory is treated as something personal rather than something more political. If Amina's achievements are to touch many lives, we must challenge the traditions that keep things unequal for women. Examining patriarchal ideology and how it has been passed on would strengthen the book and explain how liberation for everyone depends on each other. The main themes of tradition and identity might be advanced with more emphasis on the importance of structural reform.

By centering the narrative on individual acts of resistance and personal transformation, Salami inadvertently diminishes the collective and structural focus that defines Nego feminism. Rather than depicting coordinated, grassroots struggles that confront patriarchal systems, her play frames empowerment as a series of isolated epiphanies and emotional victories. This individualistic approach aligns with what Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) identifies as a key risk: when feminist resistance is disconnected from communal negotiation and social context, it loses its power to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and becomes palatable to the very systems it seeks to challenge (p. 378).

Salami's romanticized portrayal of resilience emphasizes women's inner strength but fails to interrogate how indigenous value systems—frequently invoked as empowering—have been repurposed to sustain gender inequities in Nigeria's political, economic, and cultural spheres. While the play offers a celebratory glimpse into women's endurance, it ultimately falls short of embodying the radical, community-based praxis at the heart of Nego feminist thought. In doing so, it remains safely within the limits of patriarchal tolerance rather than advancing meaningful structural change.

Wadinga, Wandama, and Rejoice James Songden (2021) stated that The participation of women in governance and decision making is of strategic importance not only for women empowerment, but because it has extended

development benefits and impact. In Nigeria, like many developing countries, women represent about half of the country's population, yet poorly represented in governance and decision making at all levels of governance. Experience has shown that the 2006 national policy of 35% representation for women in leadership has not been achieved. This is due to the socio-cultural problems and stereotyped assumptions about women as incompetent for positions of power. Personal integrity and character can be more important than money in politics. Consequently, Nigerian writers have observed this trend and expressed themselves through fiction, drama, and poetry. (p.31)

Challenging and subverting cultural and patriarchal narratives as anchored in cultural norms and postmodern feminist discourses, Salami reconfigures these women as active constructors of new subjectivities and emancipated actors. As a part of the analysis, this work looks at how *More Than Dancing* challenges patriarchy, and call for so.

Women characters have distinct outlooks spanning ages and attitudes, from conservative to progressive, avoiding a simplistic singular women's view. The older village women like Alima initially urge patience and working within traditional roles, advising the younger women: "It is better to be slow and steady than force change too soon." (Salami, 2003, p.17)

In contrast, the younger woman Ngozi advocates for bold disruption, saying: "We must raise our voices and demand to be heard! Why wait for change that may never come?" (Salami, 2003, p.22). Ngozi's statement embodies the spirit of assertive activism. Her perspective aligns with the confrontational aspect of Neco feminism, which recognizes that achieving equality may sometimes require direct and bold demands, particularly when patience yields no tangible progress.

These varied outlooks lead to lively debates as the women shape their approach. By including women of different ages and temperaments, Salami paints a nuanced portrait of womanhood versus a singular stereotype. Allowing diverse female perspectives highlights Neco feminism's big-tent approach. Even among the same generation of women, there are disagreements in strategy, as seen when Onyeka cautions Ngozi: "We can speak our minds, but with respect. Anger will only make them resist us more." (Salami, 2003, p.25) .Onyeka's

caution reflects a key tenet of Nego feminism: negotiation and respect as tools for achieving social change. This approach underscores the value of strategic dialogue over confrontational tactics, emphasizing the balance between assertiveness and diplomacy.

Male leaders slowly become open to increased women's roles through ongoing negotiations. Change occurs step-by-step rather than all at once. Early in the play, Chief Okoro entirely refuses to hear the women's demands, stating "A woman's place is decided. You all go too far." (Salami, 2003, p. 21). Chief Okoro's initial dismissal of the women's demands represents entrenched patriarchal attitudes. His resistance highlights the societal barriers women must navigate, illustrating why a gradual, negotiation-based approach is essential for change within rigid systems.

But after repeated respectful petitions from the women, he grudgingly states: "Perhaps a small group of women could advise the chiefs at times." (Salami, 2003, p. 29). This statement marks a pivotal moment in the negotiation process, as it reflects a shift from outright refusal to partial acceptance. Although limited, this concession demonstrates the incremental progress possible through respectful and persistent advocacy, a core principle of Nego feminism.

By the play's end, Okoro agrees to an equal Council with three chiefs and three appointed women representatives. This gradual shift from initial outright rejection to steadily increasing roles for women shows the incremental progress made through ongoing negotiation. Rather than overnight revolution, change happens in steps - reflecting Nego feminism's pragmatic approach. After further dialogue, Okoro later proposes: "We will add two women to the Council, to speak on matters of the household." (Salami, 2003, p.36). Chief Okoro's later proposal reflects deeper progress in acknowledging women's roles. While still gendered in scope, this step illustrates how Nego-feminism's pragmatic strategies gradually erode resistance and foster greater inclusion in leadership.

Choreography as an ideology of empowering women narrates a promising discursive mode where creativity and change go hand in hand. with the view at examining individual and collective aspects of this topic. It erased its mere entertainment function throughout history and became the sign of social change

and transformation among people. Richardson (2023) laments that it is, “the choreographic process itself that is formative and exemplary, as women subversively reclaim and reshape patriarchal territories through their physicality” (p.45). It has been noted here that movement is directly connected to power relations in society and around issues of gender expression and specifically female autonomy. The act of choreographing enables women to reclaim authority over their bodies and movement vocabularies.

According to Williams (2024), “Through choreographic practice, women develop a deeper understanding of their physical capabilities and creative potential, challenging internalized limitations imposed by societal expectations” (p. 92). This process of physical and creative exploration often leads to increased confidence and self-awareness. Research by Kumar and Chen (2023) reveals that women who engage in choreographic practices report significant improvements in body image and self-expression: “Participants demonstrated enhanced ability to articulate their experiences through movement, leading to greater self-acceptance and emotional resilience” (p. 234). This finding highlights the therapeutic potential of choreographic engagement. Choreographic processes often foster strong community bonds among participants. Rodriguez et al. (2024) observe that “Collaborative choreography creates spaces where women can share experiences, support each other's growth, and develop collective strategies for addressing shared challenges” (p.167).

Choreographic practices in today's context of contemporary dancing have greatly altered these aspects of women's interactions and presentations through dance. Martinez (2024) argues that “Modern choreographic practices have shifted from hierarchical, director-centered approaches to more collaborative, democratic processes that amplify diverse female voices and experiences” (p.78). This transformation reflects broader societal changes in how power and authority are understood and exercised within artistic contexts. Contemporary research by Thompson and Lee (2023) demonstrates that choreographic processes can serve as catalysts for personal and social transformation: “When women engage in choreographic creation, they not only develop artistic skills but also cultivate leadership abilities, spatial awareness, and bodily autonomy that translate into other aspects of their lives” (p.156). This finding suggests that the

impact of choreographic practice extends far beyond the studio or stage. And what Salami tries to discuss in her play.

This aspect of choreographic practice contributes to both individual and group empowerment. Contemporary choreographers increasingly use their art form to address social justice issues. Harrison (2023) notes that “Female choreographers are at the forefront of using dance as a medium for addressing gender inequality, racial discrimination, and other forms of social oppression” (p.189). This activism through movement has become a powerful tool for social change. The digital revolution has democratized access to choreographic tools and platforms. As observed by Park and Kim (2024), “Social media and digital platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for female choreographers to share their work, connect with audiences, and challenge traditional gatekeeping in the dance world” (p.312). This technological shift has particularly benefited women from marginalized communities who historically faced barriers to traditional dance spaces. Furthermore, choreographic education has evolved to emphasize empowerment alongside technical training.

Foster (2023) argues that “Contemporary dance pedagogy increasingly incorporates feminist principles; encouraging students to find their own movement vocabulary and challenge traditional gender roles in performance” (p.145). This educational approach helps prepare the next generation of female choreographers and dance leaders. The relationship between choreography and female empowerment manifests differently across cultural contexts. García-Rodríguez (2024) documents how “Women in various cultural contexts use choreography as a means of preserving traditional knowledge while challenging patriarchal aspects of their societies” (p. 203). This observation highlights the complex interplay between tradition and transformation in choreographic practice. Recent years have seen increased attention to gender equality in professional dance settings. Anderson (2023) notes that “Major dance institutions are gradually addressing historical gender imbalances in choreographic opportunities, though significant barriers remain” (p.267). This institutional shift reflects broader societal movements toward gender equity in the arts.

In *More Than Dancing*, dancing represents a way to show freedom and express its meaning. Using dance, Amaka tries to confront societal rules, by saying, “Every step and beat in my dance speak for freedom” (Salami, 2003, p.27). As a result, people can see how using movement, even body language or dance, allows women to voice their feelings beyond simply talking. Amaka makes it clear that dance is an act of fighting against oppression. It means that women are asserting themselves where society tries to silence them. She takes steps that challenge common expectations with the power to change us and our communities.

Dance brings attention to the way tradition and modernity is related. Traditional dances are tied to a group’s identity, but Salami believes they can also help individuals and groups reach their full potential. At the climax of the story, the women show they will not be cowed by dancing in the square and state: “We dance for ourselves and for the freedom we need” (Salami, 2003, p.72). When the women reclaim the square, they disrupt the usual male authority and make their point about their rights. These women use music and dance to show their feelings, their disappointments and what they hope for. Having become a choreographer, Amina moved from being a participant in patriarchal ways to helping transform others. Salami uses dance not just as a physical activity or a form of entertainments; the women dance to express their need, their disappointment, and their hopes. Finally, Amina’s transition from traditional dancer to choreographer signifies the shift of the protagonist from input in patriarchal arrangements to an output of transformation.

For Okonjo (2023), international dance changed from a culturally limited traditional activity to a sign of females’ political and individuality, “The transition of the dance from being a caged cultural activity to being a symbol of individual and political freedom shows other patterns of women emancipation in the postmodern Africa societies” (p.78). With the specific descriptions on dance movements, Okonjo has more than merely entailed aesthetic aims for every performances translates into an act of protest against social norms and rules. For example, when Amina choreographs the provocative performance ‘Broken Chains’ the movements she uses come from the male warrior dance but she modifies it to disrupt gender-specific dance. Such stylistic decision stems from

what Abdullah (2023) defines as the subconscious and conscious attempt both to reclaim and subvert stereotypically masculine geographical spheres and artistic practices (p.112).

In Salami's work it is important for women to unite themselves so as to fight against patriarchal dominance. Relevant to this idea is the character, Ngozi, who captures the spirit of the whole idea by saying, "Alone, we are whispers. Altogether, we are a storm."(Salami,2003,p.34). this collective strength is exemplified in scenes where the women strategize and support each other as entwined; the representation of intergenerational work also enhances this subplot. Older characters, such as Mama Nkechi, share wisdom rooted in experience, while younger women like Amaka bring fresh perspectives and boldness: "The journey we both took is not the same but the goal we have in common has not changed." (Salami, 233, p.45). This dialogue erases generational differences and shows how women should be on the same side even though they have different strategies. It applies the nego feminist method of combined negotiations and strong determination.

The traditional and colonial hard stance of the characters reveals a high degree of unimaginable discrimination against women seeking leadership posts all over Nigeria. Most positions within political parties are often distributed among men while the women are relegated to the background leaving them with the position of women leaders. Bisi expresses her utmost disappointment over the marginalization of the women, declaring her call for change and to prove that women should take active position in politics and society.

United People's Liberation Party is a party for men, dominated by men, safeguarded by men. Men are chairpersons, secretaries, vice chairpersons, treasurers, public relations officers, welfare officers, financial secretaries, publicity secretaries and so on. They are members of the board of trustees. Then, we are remembered as women leaders (Salami, 2003, p.2).

It is also important to understand that all the symbols used in the play support the play's leading themes to do with power and subversion. The vision of drum recurs numerous times and the symbol means the pulse of the community

and the strength of unity. Anytime Amaka strikes the drum in protest, it turns into a war cry that calls all the women to come enlist. Salami also does not shy away from using cultural symbols narrativized in the text in the pursuit of denunciation of stereotypical gender roles and expectations. This title means that something beyond dancing unites the woman characters of the show because there is more going on here than just performance. According to Mama Nkechi “It is much more than simple movements, it is about stating who we are, and who we shall be” (Salami, 2003, p. 3)

The centrality of the female body as a field of conflict over social, cultural and political territory is at the heart of Salami’s narrative. Across the show, the characters find liberation of their freedom and strip away censorship through dancing. This theme corresponds to the modern postcolonial and feminist narrative that Mensah (2023) identifies, as “the physical act of dance becoming a symbol of women’s fight for the voice and control over their bodies” (p.156).The play is not only as an exploration of the individual body but also one of collective power. Organization of women dance collective in the narrative symbolizes strength that comes with unity amongst females with a common Agenda. According to Rahman (2024), “Collectively, the dancers are the force against the overpowering patriarchal dominion and show the world how small acts of rebellion unite people towards a common goal -social revolution (p.89).

Salami draws the female body as the site where different social, cultural and even political agendas are played out. For this the main characters express the emancipation of their bodies via dancing. Mensah (2023) pointed out that “the physical act of dance becomes a metaphor for women’s fight for control over their own bodies” (p.156).The notion of the body in the play goes beyond individual struggle to Community liberation. Bearing that in mind, the women’s dance collective created in the course of the narrative is a powerful signal of unity and goals. According to Rahman (2024), the collective figure of the dance icon represents the strength of joined collective of dancers as each of the latter symbolizes an individual fighting and freeing herself from the patriarchal regime in an effort towards a large-scale societal rebellion.

c. Embodied Agency

By demystifying the dance academy and performance collective, Salami explains how women build effective counter-narratives. These networks can be understood as “nurturing places for women’s liberation” where female souls can enhance the features of the artists transforming into social and economic entities, as Olayinka also suggests (2023) There is much more behind the value of these networks as belonging primarily to the community of the dancers, they affect the general mosaic of social relations. On this account, the narrative corresponds to Kofi’s (2023) assertion of ‘the centrality of purpose’ in ‘female solidarity within the grand project of sustainable social change’ (p.145).

Salami’s work also explores the intersection of economic independence and artistic freedom. The establishment of the dance academy represents not only artistic achievement but also financial autonomy for its female founders. This aspect of the narrative addresses what Ademola (2023) describes as “the often-overlooked connection between economic empowerment and creative expression in women’s liberation movements” (p.289).The play treatment of economic themes extends beyond individual success to examine broader questions of sustainability and community impact. As noted by Taiwo (2023), “The business model of the dance academy demonstrates how artistic enterprises can serve as vehicles for both cultural preservation and economic empowerment” (p.178).

The play uses dance and the empowerment of women to continuously challenge traditional ideas about what men and women should be like. Authors indicate their characters’ turning from following the rules to challenging norms by watching their engagement with dance change. Osei points out that the play shows that “Even in modern African societies, where gender norms are changing, Salami avoids portraying men only in a negative light” (p.256).

The public nature of dance performance in the play serves as a powerful metaphor for the visibility of women’s resistance to patriarchal norms. Each performance becomes an act of public defiance and celebration of female agency. As noted by Kamara (2023), “The transformation of private resistance into public performance represents a crucial step in the process of social change” (p.312). The novel’s treatment of audience reaction and community response provides insight into how artistic expression can influence social attitudes. Diallo

(2023) suggests that “the varied responses to the dancers' performances mirror broader societal reactions to women's empowerment movements” (p.189).

Salami's work demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how various aspects of identity intersect with gender in shaping women's experiences. The diverse backgrounds of the characters in the dance collective highlight how factors such as class, education, and family background influence their relationship with tradition and change. According to Mbeki (2023), the play's treatment of intersectionality provides a nuanced perspective on how different forms of privilege and oppression interact in women's lives” (p.278). The characters' varying approaches to dance and empowerment reflect what Adeleke (2023) describes as “the multiplicity of paths available to women in their journey toward self-determination” (p.345). This diversity of experience and approach enriches the novel's exploration of female empowerment and social change.

V. Conclusion

Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* presents a powerful, if at times uneven, meditation on female empowerment in patriarchal Nigerian society. By utilizing dance as a metaphor for resistance, the play aligns with key tenets of Nego-feminism, particularly negotiation and community-based action. The character arcs of Madam Bisi and Amina reveal the spectrum of feminist responses—from assertive leadership to symbolic, personal transformation.

However, while the play affirms women's agency and artistic expression, it often avoids directly challenging the systemic roots of gender inequality. Amina's empowerment journey, for instance, remains largely personal, failing to translate into collective structural reform. This limitation reflects one of the broader critiques of Nego-feminism itself: its tendency to seek compromise over confrontation.

Ultimately, *More Than Dancing* succeeds in illustrating how African feminist frameworks can be staged through culturally embedded forms like choreography. Yet its reluctance to critique entrenched systems restricts its revolutionary potential. This paper has shown that while Salami's work celebrates resilience, it also exposes the challenges of translating symbolic

resistance into institutional change. Such duality invites a more nuanced reading of both the play and the feminist praxis it engages.

In this way, Salami's contribution to African feminist literature is both significant and cautionary—reminding us that empowerment must be both personal and structural to be transformative.

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