

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF AFRICAN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS AS SEEN THROUGH THE PARADIGMATIC LENS OF LITERARY STRUCTURALISM

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ABSTRACT

The structuralists' readings of the underlying principles that govern African patriarchal social structures show that the war between men and women becomes a rift between them, master against the servant; a rift which will be healed by a mediating third term: modernism and its colloraries. In analyzing myths and texts to find basic structures, structuralists found that the binary oppositions featured in literary texts modulate until they are finally resolved or reconciled by intermediary third terms. This will lead towards functions with emotional equilibrium although literate women still make men uneasy because they are economically, emotionally and traditionally liberated from the subjugation of traditions and myths; but calls for collaboration and interdependence between the sexes.

This article assesses and highlights the extent of women's empowerment brought about by modernism which enables them to distort the biological, social, and moral bonds linking them to the community.

Key words: structuralism, principles, patriarchal social structures, rift, mediating, collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

One of the striking features of African trends in literature has been the emergence of a new breed of creative writers called the feminists¹. This revolutionary fever for reform has been dramatically illustrated in the fact that African societies were organised with the intent and purpose of exploiting and abusing women. The implication, of course, is that this social organisation was the responsibility of men who ascribe gender contrariness to women in their

¹African feminists' concerns encompass a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contributions of women and the tracing of a female literary tradition, and the role of gender in both literary creation and literary criticism. See M.A.R., *Literary Criticism and Theory. From Plato to the Present*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 2008.

contact with tradition and customs, which unimaginably, encompass all African human existence. The way women are portrayed in fiction by the first generation of writers reflected the attitude of men toward their womenfolk in society.

Men's social agenda, desires and priorities, though cultural, are made to look innate to the detriment of those of women. In this kind of male chauvinist society, women are victims of all sorts of discrimination and marginalisation on the grounds of sex, culture, religion, politics and economy. The gendering of the society and its impact on people have raised issues never dreamt possible today. Both feminists and structuralists contend that if “gender” is socially constructed; and for that matter women disadvantaged and discriminated against in society; men have to come to terms with their womenfolk and balance societal roles because all human activity is constructed, not natural.

In this literary tradition, male writers as well as female ones have appropriated Western feminist theories of gender in African literary context and coined a critical theory that is indigenous and self-determining in African critical perspectives; since the realisation of feminist aesthetics is cultural-bound and peculiar to the background and experiences of African women. To my mind, in Africa even when critical of his/her society, the writer is the critic from the inside. My evaluation of selected texts in this essay discusses the formation of an African literary canon, the representation of history, ideology, and the new role of women which empowers them to engage pressing social and political issues to show that they are no longer nonentities. Sex and gender related issues are often critical and crucial to the conception and organisation of societal roles in African patriarchal structures. The intersection of gender and power in African societies often manifests itself vividly in fictional works.

Western feminist theoretical approach encompasses agitation for political and legal rights, equal opportunities, sexual autonomy and the right for self-determination and self-fulfilment². Women in Africa have also joined Western women in the fight for their quest for rights, equal opportunity, relevance and recognition thanks to their being educated on the Western model and exposed to modernity. In African literature, the movement stemmed from the recognition of women from the existence of discrimination and inequality based on sex in patriarchal social structures. Patriarchy is seen as an ideology which articulates authority and control exercised by men over women.

My contention is that access to literacy, education and urbanisation, modernism in one word, has not only empowered women but has also broadened their consciousness in a society totally committed to dynamism on the western model. In this paper, I intend to illustrate that in patriarchal social structures despite socio-cultural and economic constraints that shape and impede African women's progress, one of the multiple ways to exercise and deploy power in the society is either to be literate and /or live in an urbanised zone. In addition, the new type of consciousness, social status and behaviour acquired by women in contact with their European sisters on the one hand and their relation to their relatives on the other in dynamic African societies are under study.

This study is, above all, an investigation of the ways and means of literary signification and implication and an exploration of the whole essence of some African feminist writers picking some examples from the periscope of African mainstreamed theoretical framework. Thus at the end, we would have seen how strong women instil fear in men; but aspires and/or calls for

²See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Classics, 1949/1997.

collaboration and understanding. My interpretation of feminism is within the framework of what Ogunjipe-Leslie (1994) coins as “humanistic feminism”³. For her, this encompasses men, women and their progenies, not the ones that aim at the debasement of male characters at their hands for a harmonious and well-balanced society.

1-Patriarchal Discourse and the Status of Women

Let us premise our discussion by saying that today a dichotomising line has been drawn between the traditional role of the wo/man and the modern one for the opportunities the town, literacy and education offer affect enormously practices, values, principles and behaviours. Henceforth, the role of the man as well as that of the woman, which has been hitherto assigned, is now being acquired not assigned and differ from the pre-colonial era. It should be emphasised that the cultural or historical specificity of genders have undergone significant upheavals. In fiction, this gender-socialising function, either by conviction or aesthetic stance, reflects women's specific concerns of reconstructed womanhood.

In this hasty generalisation, men are considered as the antitheses of women. In the male tradition, women are depicted in literary works as weak and useless characters that play minor roles when compared to their male partners throughout history. Women have always occupied a secondary role in relation to men and have been relegated to the position of the “other”, i.e. which is adjectival upon the substantial subjectivity and existential activity of man. This sustained when we read Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, in teaching the reader about his Ibo society, he depicts the status of women in male dominated pre-colonial Africa in showing how they are scrutinised as defenceless second class citizens.

In this, not only does he analyse the agents of destruction of African culture but also that of the bonds between individuals and their society. In this fictional work, women are thought as weaker and more vulnerable of the two genders and lacks intensity in their behaviour. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) abounds in instances where Okonkwo beats his second wife brutally on two occasions: firstly she did not cook his lunch for him and secondly for having dared called his gun “guns that never shot”. In the society in which Achebe sets his novel, a woman is not respected as a human, but as a property, worker and producer of children. Okonkwo's wife is not given any identity but is defined in the light of her husband's status.

In Achebe's early work, while the woman is imprisoned within “immanence”, remaining a slave within the circle of imposed duties and roles which result from her maternal and reproductive functions, the man is given the opportunity to transcend and control his environment in furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, the tenets of the feminist approach believe and hold a contrary view. The view that women have been assigned to roles that keep them in the kitchen to handle household chores cannot help them aspire, at all, for fulfilment in this kind of male chauvinist societies.

Be it in the colonial or post-colonial social settings, feminists base their critical assumption on the fact that patriarchy has relegated women to the position of inferiors. The majority of women, owing to their traditional social status, still lack access to formal education and, better to literacy, therefore to information, technology and training. Such deprivations bar them from meaningfully participating or playing significant roles in their societies. This situation

³ In her *Recreating Ourselves: An African Woman and Critical Transformation*, she explains that her feminism is not about warring with men by trying to build a harmonious society. 1994.

pushes feminists to blame men for creating and sustaining myths and literature, which place and maintain women in a slavish condition.

The traditional perception of women's role in preliterate African societies makes it difficult for them to meaningfully participate or contribute to the amelioration of their condition and environment. Steeped in cultural chauvinism, the role of the woman in conservative traditionalism has been ascribed in her relationship and contact with traditions and customs. Right from birth, both the child-boy and the child-girl are assigned sexist roles to play and given sexist education in the society. The Sierra Leonian, Louise Metzger, unveils traditional women's dismay in these terms:

their daily routine consisted of cooking the day's meal, laundering dirty clothes, fetching water and wood from wherever they could be found, fishing and farming for the purpose of obtaining food, cleaning their homes, compounds, taking care of the young ones, helping the men folk to build house to live in .⁴

Patriarchal societies are the ones in which traditional gender roles coin men as active human beings and participators in the running of society. It is a form of framework within which individuals can pursue the goal of masters in the society. Traditional perceptions of women's role in pre-literate societies are assigned to them at birth. For instance, twins of different sexes are given sexist education. Critics have attributed these gender-based discrepancies to the content of socialisation children received. This socialisation, or better education, reflective of gender ideologies, is implemented at home. Parents, agents of social norms, impose rigid gender distinctions on the twins and lay emphasis on the variety of ways in which man-female relationships are controlled and determined by social norms.

Both history and religion are determinants of gender established traditions and customs which encompass human existence. The girl is given the lessons of the art of being feminine (aesthetics of femininity) and she subsequently accepts it as a code of conduct and appearance. The set of social norms and principles given to the girl gravitates around superiority of man which is designed to inspire confidence and success in man as opposed to the need of protection, vulnerability, compliance; dependence in one word. The woman's effort to maintain her femininity is spelt in economic and emotional dependency. Biology has something to do in this kind of discrimination for boy's voice breaks at puberty but that of girls lowers at that same age. A woman is not accepted to be authoritative but temper her speech to dump. The boy-child is set apart by many societies which discriminate against his girl-child counterpart who is often reduced to performing domestic roles such as cooking, doing housework, and even denied formal education. Consequently, by the age of preadolescence and adolescence the girl-child begins thinking of marriage (most of the time arranged ones) with the blessing of as many children as her womb can afford to perpetuate the clan. In the process, she becomes a victim of polygamy, early parenthood, bride price that impedes her freedom to choose a spouse and reduces the wife-to-be to the "position of chattel".

⁴ Quoted by Thelma Awori, "The Myth of Inferiority". In *The Civilisation of the African Woman*, Présence Africaine, 1975, p.199.

The contact of cultures between Africa and Europe which Achebe coined as “the chance encounter” has brought about significant upheavals at many societal levels. The status of the African woman in traditional society has become a subject of debate. Established laws, customs, attitudes, habits of thinking and the subservient roles assigned to women as the sole values of femininity has been questioned as women began to have access to Western type of education. With school, it has become abundantly clear that in Africa a woman occupies a choice place in society. It is a fact that they are the centre of all communication and developmental programmes. They are as close to children and their partners as they are to other members of the family. As far as educating the children and communicating information are concerned, they perfectly transmit the message if they are given the necessary tools. With the introduction of Western literary education in Africa, African children-girls and boys-acquire literacy and through this a specialised profession. In the process, the educated girl has to remove herself from the community where status and social hierarchy determine her place in the society. Henceforth, she is to be counted in terms of her individual achievement rather than that of the group and automatically enters into a dynamic society where she is supposed to play a wide range of roles depending on her level of education; and to assert her individuality, achieve self-fulfilment and self-assertion, a situation which does not exist in her tradition-bound society. This type of consciousness is found in Nubukpo’s (1990) critical insight:

L’écriture offre à l’individu qui s’y investit les moyens de restructurer les ressources psycho-intellectuelles qui lui sont propres, et lui permet ainsi de se détacher lentement de [sa] communauté. L’écriture pour sa part accélère ce processus d’auto-affirmation et oblige quiconque s’en sert à porter un regard plus personnel et plus critique sur le monde autour de lui.⁵

Therefore, women’s perceptive power has been increased owing to their being introduced to new patterns of life of their European counterparts and of conceiving things. The tradition-bound woman learns from her Western sister that she has to fight for her rights, equal opportunities, sexual autonomy and the right for self-determination; but is aware that the acquisition of posture that women occupy in Western countries cannot be replicated in Africa where tradition is all-pervasive. “Women become feminists by becoming conscious of and criticising the power of symbols and the ideology of culture”.⁶ This agenda has cut across all social spheres and it announces a battle in perspective because women have to contend with patriarchy’s assumption about their socio-cultural perception. Literacy acquired at school and most often in towns give them tools that enable them to question either violently or peacefully the very foundations of patriarchal social structures. In this context arose a new breed of critics who offer to be pathfinders in “patriarchal societies where the domestic was the place of the woman, while the public realm of culture, politics, and the economy was seen as the sphere of men”.⁷

⁵ Komla Messan Nubukpo, “Pourquoi enseigner la littérature ?”. In *Actes des Journées Scientifiques de l’U.B.* (6- 13 Avril), vol .1, Université du Benin, Lomé: Les presses de l’UB, 1990, pp. 9-19.

⁶ Maggie Humm, *Feminist Criticism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf: London, 1986, p.41.

⁷ Rosaldo Michelle Zimbalist, “Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview”. In *Women, Culture and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (eds). Stanford, C. Astanford University Press, 1974, pp. 17-42.

2-Re-reading the Phallogocentric Paradigm: An African feminist theory

Both readers and writers with female sensitivity hold that literary texts are full of binary oppositions and only positive values are attached to masculinity and negative ones to femininity. To this end, they propose that a feminist critical theory, which can establish a viable canon that can re-interpret, re-write, re-vision, re-read and revisit male chauvinistic literature from a less patriarchal slant, is an important tool for the understanding of women's plea and plight. In this respect, they counter attack and create a world where all men are parasites and depend on more fortunate women for survival and in which these very women tries as much as possible to break or attempt to break the subsuming fetters of matrimony and live a prosperous life with or without men.

“Bringing someone to understand a text or to see an interpretation requires shared points of departure and common mental opposition”⁸. In this sense, the interpretation of a text cannot be possible unless critics understand thoroughly the relationship between the story, the discourse and the thematic structure, i.e. the nature and conventions of the narrative. The critic and the reader of literature treat as signs what the writer is creating as a concept. Reading literature as signs is reading it as a cultural production constructed according to various preconceptions, routines, and traditions of that culture and treats them as mediated by signs which are not directly encountered in a text. This means questioning and interpreting the contradictions inherent in gender relations. So, African literature has been enriched by not only the voices of women but of men as well to express women's concern about society. From 1966 to the present, women's quest and plea found expression in fiction by being feministic in carving women and their reaction the subsuming life they lead. For Bessie Head, books are tools, and for that matter, tools that may allow readers to understand better the rich lives and conditions of African women.

Culturally men and women have different tasks to perform in traditional African society. While women have been assigned the task of fetching water, gathering firewood, food production and managing the household, and of procreation and educating the children for the child is the primordial element which increases and perpetuates the clan, men have been given the task of decision-making. Therefore, they have the strict control of all resources at the policy, economic and social level. These conceptions provide well-structured and well-defined roles for women in the education of children with two important aspects: to guide the child (boy/girl) to maturity and to teach both of them moral, spiritual and civic values in function in his/her environment and equally in function of his/her stage of development accordingly. Thus, traditional societies to my mind and that of many observers appear to be well- structured and harmoniously balanced in the sense that both man and woman share the division of labour and responsibilities. This idea has brought about and attracted considerable interests in recent years. The situations of both men and women in present-day society are being taken into account. The unfortunate imbalance in the roles of men vis a vis women creates a situation of gender inequity in home, at school and at workplace. A greater understanding of the disruption of gender roles can be gained by examining, as said earlier, the different imbalanced roles that the men and women take and with literacy and modernization the reverse roles.

⁸Jonathan Culler. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, p.64.

3-African Feminist Thrusts

A new breed of literary scholars, the feminists in all their articulations, try to fight “an ideology that associates achievement with the activities of males” (quoted in Nubukpo 1995) in patriarchal discourse. They feel that women and men need to consider what is meant to be a woman, how much of what a society has often deemed female traits is culturally constructed. Simone de Beauvoir’s critical insight questions the “otherness” of women and serves as a groundbreaking idea of feminist consciousness in advocating the resurrection of women’s literature. Masculinist power opposes feminist resistance. Since Westernisation has rendered African society fragmented, multidimensional, contradictory, and provisional, the feminists, as we call them, aim at a “reform, which appears fundamentally as an ideology whose objective is to help every woman stand on her own feet, cast off her old man-imposed self and eventually become all that she can be”⁹. Mainstreaming feminism means making “gender analysis” central to what an organisation is trying to do. Mainstreaming also means putting something in the centre of the flow as opposed to marginalisation when things are left at the edge of the flow. This simply requires that African feminists’ issues be addressed in all aspects of the organisation’s work including decision-making structures and policy-making programmes. Mainstream feminists in Africa with their clearly defined analytical theories currently dominate discussions and have become influential in shaping present-day socialisation.

Owing to the pitfalls of Euro-centric feminism and the discrimination it entails, African writers/women have articulated their own theories that encompass interconnectedness of race, class and sex oppression. The theory of “African feminism” or “Black feminism”, “motherism”, “femalism”, “womanism” or more recently “stiwiniism”¹⁰ or whatever they call it, has a large scope rather than “sexual politics”. In this analysis, it cannot be our task to inundate the reader with the myriad definition of feminism that have been advanced and discarded by African scholars over years. An inclusive conceptualisation of “Womanism”¹¹ to be of most utility for the purpose of this paper is the “domestication of men” as opposed to “women’s liberation” in the purely Western sense of the word. Such domestication, in all fairness, makes African women and their own family’s progress very possible. In the African context, an autonomous woman, who is in the European sense, rationally concerned with her own interests is a “phenomenon” totally unknown. Africans believe that feminism is a gratuitous distortion of gender lines, which aims at depicting a warped vision of society.

African men as well as women are all aware that only “collaboration” between man and woman can guarantee a modicum success. Refusal to collaborate condemns individuals to live on the margin. In fact, African feminists are looking for a means of being heard, i.e. an audibility in the societal, cultural, and political arenas because a decent African woman does not fight her partner. Rather she looks for ways and means to avoid warring with him and heads towards the construction of a harmonious society. In the Western sense, feminism is the battle for the

⁹ Komla Messan Nubukpo, “Womanist Discourse and the Future of the Male Tradition in Modern African Literature”. In *Bridges: An African Journal of English Studies*, n°6, Special Gender, Sexuality and Literature, 1995, pp. 59-66.

¹⁰ Stiwiniism: is an acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. Professor Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie coins this to replace and denounce tagged feminism. This ideology abhors radical feminism and fosters inter gender rapprochement.

¹¹ Alice Walker, “womanism” is the black American outgrowth of Feminism. The word was coined by her.

elimination of gender roles and man is seen as an enemy who hampers, at all costs, the progress of women. But in the African context the peaceful coexistence it advocates between both sexes has been acclaimed with satisfaction: “men are not to hate”. African scholars believe that the African woman has not much to do with the “equality of sexes”; but has with equality of “gender distinction”.

4-Challenging Phallocentricity with Appropriate Tools

If I write about strong women, it means I see them around. People have always assumed that to be feminine is to be silly and to be sweet. But I disagree. I hope that being a woman writer I have been faithful to the image of woman as I see them around, strong women, women who are viable in their own right¹².

When female writers came to the scene thanks to Western literary education and with the help of some male writers, they began to meaningfully exploit the newly acquired norm by representing the “woman” in depth and articulate in characteristic essentialist fashion that the so-called essence of the woman is nothing more than male creation to represent and defend his own interests. They wrote on issues such as polygamy, childbearing, childlessness, motherhood, and divorce and challenged erroneous patriarchal institutions and male-based literary tradition, as was discussed earlier, and went against the favouritism that existed in the field of education although this has been reinforced by the colonial policy. The equality of opportunity in education was a myth. In their writings, they talk of changes in the roles that women perform in the absence of their husband and show to some extent with dexterity that gender roles are dynamic and evolving. In African literature, they try to “puncture the myth of the male as a sole provider in the family competently holding positions of authority”.¹³ Therefore, in literary works of Africans, women as well as men have been deconstructing assigned societal roles of women in patriarchal societies and attempt to question phallocentric behaviours of men who are believed to have “create[d] the woman”.

In this analysis, the theoretical analysis, which I intend to make of individual texts, is concerned with women’s positional environment and challenges. I think that all these writers fit or fulfil the requirements of African feminist theories for they are all united in seeking to end the subordination of women. They are of the same views to adopt the same strategy of overcoming oppression and its colloraries. Throughout this work, an attempt has been made to show that the phenomenon of difference is learned instead of being inherited. The narrative approach in this work is to give evidence of the conductive avenues to which some of the works of writers-male and female-with feminist sensitivity intend to reach their goals. Literature is a “reflection of life” and aims at “correcting misconceptions” of societies or better, “a higher criticism of life”. In this respect, it explores and affirms the worth of the human personality and the “narrative” is one of its major means of communication.

¹² Ama Ata Aidoo, *In their Own Voices*. African Woman Writers Talk. James Adeola, ed., London: James Currey, 1990, p.12.

¹³ Umfota, Titi. “Women in Africa: Their Sociopolitical and Economic Roles”. *West Africa Review*: 2, 1.(iucode: <http://www.icaap.org/iucode?> 101.2.1.4.

To highlight these changes, I have chosen some male as well as some African female writers, though at the initial stage “fragments of women and their hopes have been recovered by female hands”¹⁴ ; who, not only give depth to their female characters and depict them as “strong, resilient and resourceful ones, but also as people who essentially support their male folk” to sustain my ideas.

The novels chosen for this purpose provide an informed and lucid introduction to the emergence of an African paradigmatic study of social constructs. They offer detailed and careful analyses of important individual texts as well as an overview of the influential theoretical and critical debates that have been the center of debate in gender studies of the novel. The historical context provided with each textual analysis that is valuable to the understanding that all human activity is constructed, not natural.

5- Critical Feminist Voices in African Creative Writing

To some critics, this is an inversion of what is generally assumed about the role of women in African society. Thus, male writers like Ekwensi, Soyinka, Achebe, Ngugi, and female ones like Buchi Emechetta, Nawal El Saadawi and Amma Darko discuss in their fictional works language as a tool of male domination, analyses the ways in which this represents their world and argues for the development of a feminine language and writing.

To this end, Buchi Emechetta features in her fiction a highly educated female protagonist called Kehide Okolo. Her husband, Albert, an unqualified Nigerian man is in contradiction with her because of the reverse of societal roles owing to the imbalance inherent in their level of education in a setting where the rights of women have undergone significant upheavals. In England, Albert’s wife is blessed with a well-paid job rewarding her high level of education in a society where the worth of the individual counts in terms of his level of education. On the other hand, Albert becomes a shopkeeper. Albert’s level of education and his salary put him in an uncomfortable position meaning that he cannot conveniently cater for the family. Kehide’s position endows her with freedom what threatens her husband; something she will never have had back in Nigeria. Losing the battle, Albert resolves to escape to his phallogocentric Nigeria where he thinks he can gain his “manhood” and self-respect. Out of frustration, he finds his salvation in getting married to another literate woman who, because of the requirements of the setting, regains the “power and prestige” which he has lost in London. Not hearing about her husband who has lost the battle of England, she finds the “new Albert’s” in Nigeria with a son and expecting another. Deceived for having lost the battle of Africa, say, Nigeria, she returns to London to start life anew.

To establish his feminist credentials, Chinua Achebe, who has always been accused of being so phallogocentric in his depiction of women, creates Beatrice Nnyabuife who comes out with a first class degree from Oxford University. With her certificates in hand, she joins the Ministry of finance in the *Anthills of the Savannah*. In this, tradition holds that the eldest male relative mandates the naming ceremony of babies. When Elewa’s uncle was late for he was busy drinking, Beatrice gave the child the name “Amaechina” which means in the local language

¹⁴ Abena Busia quoted in Carolyn Kumah, “African Women and Literature”. In *West Africa Review*: 2, 1(2000). [1 uicode: <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?101.2.1.15>]

“may the path never close”; a name which is always given by a patriarch to a male child. When the old man arrives late at Beatrice’s flat, he only ratifies the act. The path and the step both she and Amaechina have taken is that of taking an advantage of men and expect it to be continuous and always open. Beatrice assumes the role of men because of her newly acquired social status. She does things on her own way and tries to be very much independent.

Ngugi’s female protagonist, Waringa falls in the same vein. She is presented as a woman who has learnt thoroughly the lessons of feminism and tries to fend her way in phallogocentric Kenya. Ngugi has gone to great lengths to obliterate in her all the traits of motherhood in presenting her as having masculine virtues. Poor Jacinta Waringa is sent to live with her uncle because the imperialists have imprisoned her parents for their alleged involvement in the Mau Mau resistance. Without her consent, her uncle arranged a marriage between her and the rich old man from Ngorika in exchange for some favours. The result is deplorable. The macho old man impregnated and abandoned her. Fed up with men’s behaviour, she decides henceforth never to rely on any man in the society; but on her own.

She succeeded in becoming a typist in Nairobi and works under Mr Kihara who happens to be her employer. For having refused to submit to her Boss’s sexual advances, she is fired. As fate would have it, her boyfriend also sends her away because he suspects her of being Kihara’s mistress. As if to add insult to injury, on instructions of Boss Kihara, her landlord also sends her away. Desperate, she decides to go to her hometown Ilmorog as a strategy. She thought it was high time she fended on her own a way through this hostile world. She heads for a Polytechnic School to train as an engineer. Waringa seems to be fated to face hardships. There she has pecuniary problems; but since she has learnt to be self-reliant, she refuses her new lover, Gathuira’s, financial support and does all kinds of jobs to pay for her studies. Finally, Waringa becomes an auto-mechanic engineer with all colours flying as she tops the class after the results. She decides to get married to Gathuira; but was astonished to notice that her prospective father-in-law happens to be the old man who had impregnated and abandoned her. Shocked, Waringa the “martial artist” opens her bag, takes out a pistol, shoots dead Gathuira’s father and two of the guests, and walked away calmly. The plan made by Gathuira and his father in view of reconciliation because he has been for a long time estranged from his father, becomes nightmarish.

Wole Soyinka carves a character that is well educated and independent. In this case, Simi as she is called is independent from “sugar daddies” that come to her. They are always left chastened. She has “many hangers on” on whom she tolerated as her protectors. Many men serve her: ran errands and take commissions for her. In her world, she does not only dominate men but also all her surroundings. Women generally do not have the chance to assume this kind of role. This is how Soyinka presents the distortion of gender roles in his fictional work. In another instance in the same fictional work Denhiwa is engaged with Sagoe as betroths. Unfortunately, Sagoe happens to be of a different tribe in that tradition-bound society. On hearing this, her mother confronts her on the issue and she explodes, “who I move with is my business”. Her mother does not understand why she acts on her own after having suffered to send her to England to study; what leads to her present position in the senior civil service. When her mother tells her that she was not ready to have a Hausa grandson, Denhiwa promises to reimburse all the money she invested on her during her studies and be free to act on her will. With Sagoe, a fellow professional, Denhiwa feels equal in all their activities. Both of them visit night clubs and attend seminars.

Another character presented as independent and free woman is Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana, who is the daughter of a catechist. According to her father's will, she gets married to a filling-station attendant because his standard seems to be better than her father's. She accepts. Unfortunately, her marriage is not blessed with a child and she becomes a pariah. Her husband takes a second wife as tradition demands it. In this case, she goes to the town and follows the rhythm of life in town. She lives first with an African music bandleader and second with a white expatriate. Thereafter, she goes into clothing business and travels abroad to acquire materials for sale. Her new social status having been established owing to the success of her business, she mixes with politics with one uncle Taiwo, a corrupt politician to secure revenge against Freddy Namme, a young lawyer whom she had helped by her own means, to send to England as her future old-age insurance. Because of the fact that he had decided with the help of his wife-a stranger-to eschew her; he had become her enemy. During the electoral process, she plays a significant role in manipulating votes for Uncle Taiwo. Endowed with male values, she brings two warring villages together by seducing one of the chiefs and exacting peace settlement as payment. The manipulating of people of different nationalities on cultural, social, and economic arena makes Jagua Nana a powerful force to contend with.

In the light of all that has been said so far about as to the new behaviour of women in society, it is believed that women should have an equal duty for the good of humanity because centuries of cultural practices and beliefs have impeded women's development as a prerequisite for actualising developmental programmes. Ample evidence in African literature points to the fact that traditional roles have been altered in society. Roles that were gender specific have become gender neutral. While some women try as much as possible to head some families others have become breadwinners as men. Today the pair of trousers has become genderless. Some traditional activities as midwifery that was exclusively devoted to women have changed its hand to be neutral. Men train to be gynaecologists in modern hospitals. Now men are seen to sell in the markets whatever can give them money. It is high time we said that "Gender restrictions have broken down"¹⁵.

It is generally an acknowledged axiom that gender roles are socially constructed and woman's significance in the social structure is determined therein. Writers have also showed that it not only educated women that join the educated ones in the battle as we have premised in this work. Ama Darko clearly demonstrates this in her *Beyond the Horizon*. Mara has not been to school. According to tradition, she gets married to Akobi for a bride price. He brings her to the city and insists that she be subservient to the extreme. In this setting, she suffered physically, mentally and emotionally. To add insult to injury he sells all her belongings one by one, without her knowing and travels abroad where he gets married to a white woman. After several years, he asks her to come and live with him. In Germany, he asks her to pretend that she is his sister. On top of this, he prostitutes her and uses the money to care for another woman he has brought clandestinely from his village. One day it dawns on Mara that all the money she gains from prostitution spree is misused. Upset, she continues her newfound job and subsequently becomes addicted to drugs. In the long run, she boldly betrays her husband and he is arrested by the police. Finally, she decides not to return to Ghana anymore and sticks to prostitution to care for her mother and sons back in Ghana.

¹⁵Titi Umfota, op. cit.

All the women discussed in this essay, break the boundaries of traditional male or female gender roles. For instance, Waringa's, Denhiwa's, Simi's, Beatrice's and Jagua Nana's strength are one of the major examples of a discrepancy between their gender and the traits they display in phallogocentric settings. The distortion of gender traits and roles sometimes involve sexual ambiguity and problems as is in the case of Albert and Kehinde. Albert's challenged masculinity leads to marital problems and to his running away and remarrying in secret with another woman who gave her a boy. Likewise, Simi's resistance to male domination causes her to be feared even by women. Women's access to status, rights and authority comes from their acquired status due to their being schooled in the western sense. The changing dynamics within the family brought about by the West is that which is found in Achebe's fiction. In fact, Obierika aptly puts this in this way: "the white man has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart"¹⁶ in a "culture which does permit women...to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings"¹⁷. Achebe's knife is no doubt "Western corpus", in other words, literacy and colonial school, church, hospitals and the "things that held us together" is traditions and customs. It should be noted that women liberated from the hold of tradition are usually found in marginal situations because of "their criticising the power of symbols and the ideology of culture"¹⁸. Remi in Ekwensi's fiction thinks that men are inferior beings. "Once they see you are different they are afraid. They cannot even get an erection because of fear"¹⁹. With modernity society has been deviated from the "control by the elders, the control by taboos and society, all have been lifted"²⁰. So the new society has created women who are "free from bondage of traditional marriage mores"²¹. The education acquired by the Waringas, Denhiwas, Simis, Beatrices, Remi's and the Jagua Nanas, to mention just a few, has become a "mask that made them symbols of the new woman"²² because "the logic of modernity is intrinsically to empower, to free the [woman] from parochial ties"²³.

The problems of women dominating their male counterparts and making them play second fiddle as was said earlier, is indeed strange to Africans. Men consider these strange ideas as cultural imperialism. Even for them "the higher the education of the girl, the higher the socio-economic strata from which she can choose a potential husband and consequently the higher her bride price". In francophone African literature, this is also legion. In Guillaume Oyono Mbida's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, the protagonist Juliette, a young school-girl does not understand why, as an educated girl of her profile should be subjected to, or become a commodity which is going to yield a lot of money to her parents although she has fallen in love with the educated Oko; a young man of her age. The customary marriage is a social contract agreed to by two families without the consent of the young girl. This is one of the premises of phallogocentric societies where a girl may be married even prior to puberty. The dowry the man pays enables the woman to be his property. Traditionalists believe that the paid dowry gives stability to

¹⁶Things Fall Apart, 1958, p.160.

¹⁷Betty Friedman, *The Feminine Mystique*, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1963, pp.76-77.

¹⁸Maggie Humm, *Feminist Criticism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf: London, 1986, p.41.

¹⁹Cyprian Ekwensi, *Iska*, Huthinton, 1966, p.96

²⁰Ibid.

²¹G-C Mutiso, *Sociopolitical Thought in Modern African Literature*, London: Macmillan, 1975, p.59.

²²David Rubadiri, *No Bride Price*, p.13.

²³Olufunke Okome. A paper presented by Mojumbaoulu entitled "African Women: Reflection on Their Social, Economic and Political Power" at Lehman College, Cuny, May 2, 1999.

households because it must be paid back in case of divorce. For instance Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* was to be a virgin before marrying Chike although the latter has several times experienced sexual pleasures.

Adah in the *Second Class Citizen* by Buchi Emechetta has been compelled to get married as early as possible for the bride price is going to be used as a “scholarship” for Old Pa’s male child. In the same token, Ogbandje Ojebeta was sold in *The Slave Girl* by Okoli to cope with the requirements of his “age-group”. This barbaristic practice is meant to degrade the status of women. Thelma Awori thinks that: “the custom of the bride-price in so far as it operated against the freedom to choose a spouse, degraded the wife to the position of a chattel or slave and constituted a drawback to the recognition of the human dignity of woman”.²⁴

Until the 60s African literature was male-authored and depicted “females with loose morals”²⁵ in contradiction with their male counterparts. The themes tilled by feminists today unfold as antitheses or binary oppositions to the woman and man, wife and husband, parent and child, old generation and new generation and finally as tradition and modernity. All the characters are trapped in a series of crisis through this opposition. By not following the norms of the traditional society, women *are distorting* the social, moral, cultural bonds between them and their community. All these misunderstandings result from conflicts in which “tradition” and “modernity” engage; a conflict which pronounces rupture or distortion. The demands and expectations of traditions and customs and those of modernism trap the society. Tradition opposes modernity. The new generation is in conflict with the old one; the “old order” opposes the “new order”. Cultural values in Africa advocate respect for elders. To disobey them means disobeying the authority that embodies and represents tradition.

African literature as well as all the literatures of the world is that which concerns itself with its own realities. The West concerns itself with its alleged values to depict its women as educated, modern, having control over their own body. To do so is to attempt to say that the quest of western women is far different from that of African women. On the other hand, the African woman is depicted as ignorant, tradition-bound and domestic to show the neglect and disregard they are victims of. What is undeniable is that women’s posture acquisition is an artifact that cannot be replicated in Africa where tradition is all pervasive. The discrepancy between the roles women as well as men play is reflected in the “inequality” which arises from beliefs, norms and value systems which result from centuries of practice and upholding. Although women’s education and emancipation have stifled their protest against continuing exploitation, the dynamics of change within families and societies have attained greater proportions. The hostility to change is entrenched in several modern societies. James Adeola has this to say: “you are oppressed at home; you are oppressed at work; your husband oppresses you; your employer oppresses you and then your society piles up on you double, if not treble suffering.”²⁶

In this work, texts written by both male and female African writers ranging from the Nigerians Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Buchi Emechetta, the Ghanaian Amma Darko, the Egyptian Nawaal El Saadawi and many others provides us with inhibitions

²⁴ Thelma Awori, op.cit. p.32.

²⁵ G-C Mutiso, op.cit. p.51.

²⁶ James Cury, *In Their Own Voices*, London, 1990, p.114.

and encumbrances of their womenfolk. Their works are slightly analysed for their structures of opposition, particularly binary ones, as informing structures which represent the central concerns and imaginative structures of their originating societies. It is a fact that African traditional civilization was an agrarian one and therefore the role of women was unquestionably characterized by motherhood, hospitality and life with man.

In Nawal El Saadawi's fiction, she attempts to explain that the power relation embedded in such attitude is sexist and reduces woman to a subhuman level. In this novel, she tells the life of one Firdaus from village childhood to the position of a "prostitute" which she believes is far better than that of being a "wife". She defines "wife" in terms of slavery and domestic. Set in an Arab world that is reputed to be strictly controlled by powerful religious and patriarchal tenets, *Woman at Point Zero* reveals the particularistic interests beneath the posture of prostitution. A prostitute is a self-respecting woman who makes the man pay heavily before getting at her and at her will. On the other hand, a wife is the most exploited slave who has no control over her own sex for marriage is a system built on the cruelest suffering of the woman. The local authorities viewed Nawaal's views unfavorably. Critics consider her as a spokesman on the status of women in the Islamic world.

Emechetta, Ekwensi, Soyinka, Achebe...just to mention a few, within this limited scope suggest that the possibilities for women's behaving in particular ways depend on the new impetus given to femininity-woman-in new patriarchal social structures and that these roles are embedded in new opportunities that her new social status offer her on acquiring knowledge, i.e. literacy. In this case the subversion of patriarchal division of labour due to the acquisition of literacy reflects the binary configuration through which feminists analyse both their "enemies" and their own resistance. It is a fact that women's ability to fight comes from their acquired social status which empowers them to break down the cycles of sexism, violence, discrimination and cause men to abuse and oppress them to stop and reexamine their ways. Females sensitizing females can take many forms; motherly and sisterly or mentor and pupil to narrate stories that will enable them to educate their sisters, mothers, even brothers, fathers or husbands to resist oppression and dominance and get united in a male-dominated society which is full of male violence.

By problematising the terms "male" and "female", "tradition" and "modernism" these social critics are exploring ways to the "reordering of the social order"²⁷. Africa needs women who will contribute to their own real values in contemporary Africa and these values should not be restricted only to biological function of motherhood. By modernizing African values these critics give voices to women who, in turn, show that they can contribute positively to the debate on the fate of African women. Writers have to ensure that gender equity needs to be translated into real action on the ground. It is about time both men and women intensified present efforts at mobilizing all stakeholders to be realistic and ensure that gender equity be attained as a prerequisite for sustainable development in the changing African societies.

By promoting complementarity and collaboration among sexes they fight for a well-being of the whole community. Increasing the number of literate women means spurring economic development, ameliorating poverty, achieving a livable environment and fostering greater

²⁷ Kolawole quoted by Tola Mosandoni, In "Marriage, Women and Tradition in Guillaume Oyômô Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*, *West Africa Review*: 2, 1, [iucode: <http://www.icaap.org/iucode?101.2.6>]. (2000).

opportunity for both men and women. Colonialism has positioned African literature as part of post-colonial literature because it carries some ideological concepts, which lead to a biased reading of works produced by African writers. Although the educated women are depicted as having multi-dimensional roles to play today and are no longer marginal to the plot of the novels, some critics have pointed out that a female literate should have a threefold commitment: to be as a writer, as a woman, and as a Third World person developing an understanding of the cultural mores that support women's empowerment.

I hope that the concern of feminists should be the articulation of interaction of gender, class, and sexuality that creates differences about women and to look beyond this to tackle the problems of diversity among women. The “acada-women” or better, educated women which have been discussed in this text are distorting the biological, social, and moral bonds between them and their community. These distortions generate in conflict and pronounce a rupture between African tradition and modern tradition, a kind of new generation against old generation, between modern Africa and ancient Africa, in short between tradition and modernity. The community is in great turmoil.

Feminism, whether called a “disorder, a deviation, an extremism associated with misguided, frustrated or disgruntled women” (quoted by Ejinkeonye, 1997) or “A house divided” must present a coherent clarification of its tenets, goals, practices and aim at pointing out the bondage and subjugation in which women are put.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this analysis, it is significant to note that the majority of African women lack access to modernity and this has been a major setback in empowering them to take decisions about their own freedom, self-determination, sexual autonomy and equal opportunity. Even if literacy offers all these to the literates, traditional perceptions of women's role in society still rings in men's mind. The belief persists among women, even literates, which the important role for a woman is to have children. Western education transmits Western culture to women. Women should not use this education as a tool that can help them to fiercely fight their male counterparts; and the man should not use it as a vehicle of oppression and subjugation. Giving a woman a “voice” means giving her the choice to make a choice. This means empowered African women should define their priorities and invent concepts, philosophies and ideologies accepted by their male counterparts for a better cohabitation, in other words, present a coherent clarification of their tenets, goals and practices. This study has explored women's everyday lives in order to understand their experiences of empowerment/ disempowerment and has focused on the relationship between education and women's work and access to resources, and their experiences of balancing productive work.

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