

Women's Quest For Rights: African Feminist Theory In Fiction

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Abstract

Women's rights and women's being have always been taken for granted, nicely and safely tucked away under the bed of patriarchy. Silence was the virtue of women and passivity their garner, but it was not always so. Traditional societies in pre-colonial times had spheres of power and influence for women in closely-knit organizations that helped them maintain a voice. Colonialism has its merits but its new culture of ascendancy through education, white-collar jobs and money-driven economy relegated women down the ladder.

With women education came exposure and awareness and the inevitable reaction. Feminism is a reaction; it is an assertion of being, rights and status. Literature has proved a worthy tool in interrogating the female condition. The silence was broken by women writers in the mid-sixties in the continent which correspondingly was the era of political independence of quite a number of African States. The decade, that followed, witnessed shades of feministic writing by African women and has advanced the women's cause of recognition and relevance. This paper theorizes women's writing in Africa and shows how a pattern of women assertion has emerged and has impacted the canon of African Literature.

Introduction

If African women of the twentieth century should stop and think when the "rain started beating us" quoting Chinua Achebe's popularized proverb, it will be when the men galloped away, enveloped as they were in the colonialists' new culture of religion, education and money driven economy. The women were left behind to mind the homes, the children and the farms. Their erstwhile dependence on the men deepened as their consumerist status heightened. The men had all the money and the power. We blame colonialism as a whip horse but it is colonialism that eventually offered the beacon of light of women's western education and exposure which propelled us to the outer wider world and recognition of the commonality of women's subjugation world-wide.

Women in Africa latterly have joined women in other nations in their quest for rights, for opportunity, relevance and recognition. This feminist quest is not imported, it cannot be. Nobody knows the latent volcano of the soul of woman nor indeed of man which can erupt suddenly and determinably. Feminism is a reaction of women with guts and steam and nobody tells the other to remove her head from the yoke. It is only the determinant weight. This is so

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when we later examine the varied nature of feminisms in countries and women's reactions to their burdens. The term "feminism" is English, as the language itself, but its realization is inextricably bound to the culture and peculiar backgrounds and experiences of the women.

It thus becomes worthwhile at this point to show the coping strategies of some women in cultures in Africa to maintain some measure of autonomy in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. This is an important prelude to women's emancipation and quest for rights and status today.

It is incidental to reproduce some of the assertions of Chinweizu in his book tellingly titled *Anatomy of Female Power*. His thesis is that women are powerful and exercise that power over men contrary to general belief and acceptance. He writes:

Because every man has as boss his wife or his mother, or some other woman in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world. Thus contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss, of the world.¹

He then went on to list three prongs on which female power hangs in the domination of man. These are; mother power, bride power and wife power. I am quick to disprove this semblance of female power by citing an Ogbaru Igbo proverb:

Onwunwe nwata na enwe ewu bu na aji

Translates as "a child's ownership of a goat is only skin-deep." In other words, it is no ownership at all. This is informed by an anecdote which tells of how a father bought a kid and gave it to his son to keep and tend. Everybody called it the son's goat. The son took great care of his goat, feeding it with choice verdure and spring water and the goat fattened accordingly. One day the boy came back home from collecting grass for the goat to find that "his goat" has been slaughtered for meal for some august visitors without his consent or even information. He realized to his chagrin that, that goat was never his, the real owner had demonstrated his

¹ Chinweizu, *Anatomy of Female Power* (Lagos, Nigeria: Pero Press, 1990) 12

ownership. That is analogous to female power. The woman is mother but the child belongs to his father whose name and lineage he bears and belongs to. The same applies to the wife who relocates to the husband's house albeit in an impressive ceremony and whose name she bears. The high degree of dependence and so handicap is apparent in this situation.

However, I here reproduce Chinweizu's distinctions in the nature of male and female power realizations:

Generally then, whereas male power tends to be crude, confrontational and direct, female Power tends to be subtle, manipulative and indirect. Whereas aggressiveness is the hallmark of male power, maneuver is the hallmark of female power. And where man Is the great physical aggressor, woman is the great psychological maneuver. From a Male-centered point of view of what power is, it is easy to be misled into thinking That a female form of power does not exist at all; and even when female power is Recognized, it is easy to dismiss it as power of an inferior type, just because it is not Hard, aggressive or boastful like the highly visible male form.²

These quotations serve as fitting prelude to the appreciation of female self assertion in fiction by select African women to show the various stages and locations of the feministic encounter. The whole objective is to give women a voice and locus in their own affairs especially within the marriage institution and in other affairs that concern them directly.

When Flora Nwapa (1930-93) started writing in 1966, she was the first published Nigerian and African female writer. Her writing interest was women and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels. She started from the grass-roots and situated her women characters in the village environment with its masculine supremacy and dominance where gender roles and relationships were strictly circumscribed by norms and tradition. Her first two novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970) featured village women who though unlettered, were accomplished and distinguished in their societies. *Efuru* was imbued with beauty, intelligence, industry and economic power. She was successful in life but not fecund. Her feminism shone forth in that she was able to marry her first husband without the

² Chinweizu, 12

requisite dowry. She was able to live down the shame and abasement of two failed marriages and exercised her right of choice of staying married or returning to her father's house. She was still admired and respected at the end of the novel. Idu, the protagonist in the eponymous novel shattered convention by choosing death rather than succumb to a levirate marriage at the demise of her husband.

In Nwapa's *One is Enough* she continued with the exploration of the woman's options in the face of subjugation and victimization in marriage. She highlighted further, the paramount issue of childlessness in marriage. Amaka, after six years of marriage without children, fled from her marital home and her adulterous husband who had fathered two sons with another woman unknown to Amaka. Her city refuge opened up vistas in self-fulfillment due to her guts, industry and tenacity. In the permissive environment of the city, she became the mother of twin sons. But she would not marry the twins' father preferring her new freedom because she said "one marriage is enough for a lifetime."

Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Joys of Motherhood* presents to us the character of Adaku who in her marriage to two brothers had two daughters. Her position in the polygamous home was not assured because she had no son as her co-wife Nnuego. She walked out of her marriage into prostitution to make money to ensure the future of her daughters.

Nwapa's female characters in these and her subsequent novel *Women are Different* (1986) broke societal norms in order to assert themselves. The significant point here is that the women were successful in their dissent and were acclaimed by the society and their erstwhile husbands. They were not condemned nor ostracized. They were rather accorded recognition and respect. The immoral aspect of this early form of the women's dissent will prove problematic as emulating strategies for up-coming generations. For indeed, Nwapa's *Women are Different*

shows a generational face in women assertion. The three female protagonists had their fair share of male disappointments in love and marriage but they did not disregard the marriage institution nor the responsibility of motherhood. But their children became extremely iconoclastic and they even internationalized their escapades. The authorial intrusion shows Nwapa's point of view, when Chinwe the daughter of Dora, one of the three protagonists suddenly divorced her husband of dwindling means and concentrated on her contract business. Nwapa quipped:

Chinwe had done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mother's own. Her generation was telling the men, that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They were saying that women, have options. Their lives cannot be ruined because of a bad marriage. They have a choice, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry or divorce their husbands. Marriage is not THE only way.³

What Nwapa and Emecheta are advocating for is personhood. By urging women to break out of subsuming norms and situations as the marriage institution, they stand the enormous risk of being dubbed cultural deviationists. For the marriage institution is sacred to culture, tradition and religion. But the truth of the matter is that a dreaded disease needs a correspondingly drastic cure. The ways our women writers liberated their women characters from the gendered yoke was to make them burst the system and be free. By the time the shock waves subside, the lesson would have been learnt.

Nawal el Saadawi, the radical Egyptian writer of renown raised the bar of women's solutions still higher and graver. Her protagonists scored feminist victories by the outright killing of their male oppressors. One may argue that the women's actions are justified by the enormity and brutality of their male combatants. Two novels of El Saadawi are cited here – *God Dies by the Nile* (1985) and *Woman at Point Zero* (1997). The god in *God Dies by the Nile* is the mayor of Kafr el Tin whose lecherous and corrupt ways caused ruin to many homes in this poor rural peasant setting. When the mayor turned his attention to Zakeya's family which consisted

³ Flora Nwapa, *Women are Different* (Emgu, Nigeria: Tana Press, 1984) 188-189

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of her son, her brother and his two teenage daughters, he presumed on female passivity, dumbness and weakness. In this remote village, his word was law and with a cabal of three village officials, the chief guard, the imam and the village barber he was able to carry out his nefarious acts of fraud, debauchery and sanctioned rape. In a demonic process of a show of power, he brought the two nieces of Zakeya to work in his mansion where he defiled them, one after another, causing the first daughter to run away from home never to come back, and the second, pregnant with his baby also left. Zakeya's brother was falsely accused of theft and imprisoned, and her son, her only child was not saved from the mayor's evil grip. Zakeya was left alone in bewilderment and loneliness. With each departure of a member of her family, she continued to lapse into impassivity and depression and her gloom deepened. She eventually saw the light which rested on the mayor as the source of her pain. Completely bereft, she quietly positioned herself on the path of the mayor's way to work in the morning and with her hoe, the implement of her trade and her subjugation, she dealt him a fatal blow.

Firdaus, the protagonist in the telling title of the novel *Woman at Point Zero* also reached her limit of dispossession and subjugation and actually in self-defense killed the menacing pimp Marzouk. A third example will serve to make the point. The new novel of Nigeria's Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in a subtle manner shows Mrs. Beatrice Achike, the voiceless, lack-luster, docile wife of the successful but overtly overbearing husband, Omelora Eugene Achike. He was fanatical in all his endeavors, be it in his faith, the education of his children, home discipline or his job. In the suffocating ambience of his enormous wealth and intimidation where both his wife and his two children live in awe of him, the author quietly ushered in a domestic revolution through the wife who slowly and methodically poisoned her husband. She freed herself and her children from the yoke. Normalcy was restored to the

family, after the law took its toll. Buchi Emecheta in her novel *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) showed women solidarity in enacting a gruesome punishment on the Dane, Ronje, for raping Ayoko. Marie Umeh sees the novel as a role-reversing prose-narrative, contrived to deflate centuries of male egotism and hypocrisy and to identify the female with intelligence, creativity and strength.”⁴ The rape of Ayoko at a higher symbolic level is the rape of Shavi in the devastating result of their colonial encounter. The women avenged womanhood and the town. The point however is that in their reaction, they resorted to murder.

The worrying streak in all these is whether there are not other ways open to subsumed women to adopt? Must they become promiscuous, even prostitutes, in order to break away and be independent? Further, must they take life in order to be free? In the latter question, Firdaus acted in self defense. The pimp threatened her with a knife but she was faster and used the weapon on him instead. Saadawi presents murder as the only option for the severely abused and traumatized female characters. This underscores the radicalism of Dr. Saadawi and the message is resoundingly given. The worry is if aggrieved women then killed all their male culprits, there will be very few men left, indeed, if any at all. This is a phase in feministic writing in Africa. One can look forward to the near future where other ways of shaking off the yoke can be explored.

From the above discussion, it does appear that women’s dependence on men, husbands or paramours alike is economic. Most of these women sufferers have neither education nor viable means of livelihood. Charles Nnolim in his discussion of Nwapa’s women’s characters writes: “The lesson? Women shall never stop suffering at the hands of men. But the women’s saving

⁴ Marie Umeh, “The Inimitable Buchi Wmecheta,” in *Feminism in African Literature; Essays on Criticism*, 2nd ed. Helen Chukwuma ed. (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Pearl Publishers, 2003)

grace, their last redoubt, lies in being economically independent.”⁵ Marie Umeh is of the opinion that Nwapa’s “canonical contribution to Nigerian letters is then a poetics of economic independence and self-reliance for female empowerment.”⁶ Umeh goes on to cite Nwapa in her own words:

Nwapa: . . . I feel that every woman, married or single, must have economic independence. If you look at *One is Enough*, I quote a Hausa proverb which says ‘a woman who holds her husband as a father dies an⁷ orphan’.

Umeh: My interpretation of the proverb is that a woman should be economically independent. One should not rely on inheritance or men for survival?

Nwapa: Exactly.

Nwapa’s novels demonstrate this: from Efuru the village belle, who, unlettered but intelligent and insightful, refused to accompany her husband to farm because it is labor-intensive with a low economic yield, rather persuaded him to join her in long distance trading which is less taxing and yields more money. Because of her economic stability, she could survive comfortably when her husband deserted her. The same is true of Amaka in *One is Enough*. Economic viability, therefore is one of the foot-holds of African feminism as ensconced in novels by African female writers.

The second enabling factor is space, location and environment. The novelists show that subjugated women on the rebound need their space, their own struggle pad. They remove themselves from their subsuming environment in order to create a free niche for their avowal. Firdaus in Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* was a woman on the run, in quest for her own space where she can work out her fulfillment. The more she was denied, the more she was driven so that eventually the street became her domain until she could find clientele for her body. The

⁵ Charles Nnolim, “Flora Nwapa: Writer as Woman,” *Journal of Women’s Studies in Africa*, JOWSA harmanttan, (2000) 113-124

⁶ Marie Umeh, “The Poetics of Economic Independence for Female Empowerment: An Interview with Flora Nwapa” in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, Marie Umeh ed, (Trenton, New jersey: Africa World Press, 1998) 664

⁷ Umeh, “The Poetics. . .” 670

street for Firdaus was similar to the city for Amaka in its expansive space, its unlimited freedom, its permissiveness and impersonal relations. Fleeing from a violent husband and broken marriage, it was to Lagos that Amaka repaired to find her fulfillment and identity. Umeh citing Deborah E. McDowell lists the journey as a prevalent motif in feministic novels.⁸ I had argued elsewhere that the journey motif

on the physical side, involves a distancing, a far remove to a new place which makes its own demands and sets its own standards. Here, Amaka physically moved from Onitsha to Lagos, six hundred miles away. The journey is also appreciated on the symbolic level where it involves a metamorphosis in orientation and goals on the part of the traveler. In moving from the interior to the exterior or the limelight, the heroine sheds her personality. Amaka moves from Idealism to Realism (from innocence to experience).⁹

The women writers make their female protagonists burst the marriage institution when it becomes too subjugating. Thus Amaka in *One is Enough*, Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*, Adah in *Second Class Citizen*, Adaku in *Joys of Motherhood* and others, all go away from their matrimonial homes, distancing themselves physically and psychologically to seek their individuality and self-realization in the wider world.

African feminism is not anti-male nor motherhood. Amaka's progressive-looking mother and aunt are quick to point that out. For Amaka, after the failure of her marriage, told her mother, "no, mother I have said goodbye to husbands," her mother replied. "That's better. Goodbye to husbands to not goodbye to men. They are two different things."¹⁰ Earlier in the novel when Amaka's two suitors died and she was feeling jinxed, her mother advised her:

Marriage or no marriage, have children. Your children will take care of you in old age. You will be very lonely if you do not have children. As a mother, you are fulfilled."¹¹

The last point worth emphasizing in the women's quest for rights is the importance of education for women. Education imparts knowledge, discernment, exposure and self esteem. El Saadawi

⁸ Marie Umeh, "The Practice of Thwarted Sensitivity" in *Cultural Theory and African Literature*. Ernest Emenyon ed. (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1987) 199

⁹ Chukwuma, *Accents in the African Novel*, 2nd ed. (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Peral Publishers, 2003) 84

¹⁰ Nwapa, *One is Enough* (Enugu: Tana Press, 1990) 85

¹¹ Nwapa, *One is Enough* (Enugu: Tana Press, 1990) 85

shows how much Firdaus strove to be educated and how as often, she was frustrated. Her cousin himself a university graduate who took care of her at the demise of her parents, saw her through high school where she showed tremendous brilliance and promise. On her appeal to be sent to the university, her cousin in an ironic twist told her that “girls do not attend university.” Even in her stint with prostitution, she always positioned her framed high school certificate for her clients to see. The implication of this for the author is that Firdaus’ life would have turned out differently if she were given the opportunity of an education. Agnes, one of the three main characters in Nwapa’s *Women are Different*, was married off by the connivance of her stepmother after her high school, to an Onitsha trader. She studied at home and later attended a university. It was her graduate certificate that enabled her to fend for herself after her split with her husband and later the demise of her mentor. Agnes’ life had impacted others. Her friend, Dora, not as educated as Agnes was abandoned by her husband Chris. She ruminated:

She had a duty, and that duty was to her children. No matter what happened, she must give her children a good education. They would not be like her. They must go to the university like Agnes. Yes like Agnes. Agnes had her children and had gone to the university. Agnes was her own mistress now.¹²

Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* were able to survive after the break with, and abandonment of, their husbands respectively because they were educated and professionals.

Education is a mighty step forward for women in the various nations of Africa today and the reality on the ground is that girls are encouraged to read by their parents and have various governments’ and agency’s sponsorship. There are also Adult Literacy Programs. Illiteracy is still high among older women and this poses a problem for writers reaching them through books. This non-accommodation of illiterate women in their large numbers was what Micere Mugo

¹² Nwapa, *Women are Different*, 73

forcefully called “book apartheid.”¹³ In her address to a Book Fair in Zimbabwe in 1985 she spoke on behalf of “our underprivileged sisters out there --- (who) have been unaccommodated by the world of books and written ideas. The basic blame lies squarely on the oppressive economic conditions and socio-political environments that they live under and which we must seek to destroy. This is the challenge that my paper poses to this distinguished community of women and men of books.”¹⁴

This problem has been resolved in two ways, though with minimal impact. First is the language and secondly, the medium of transmission. Some African writers, mostly males, have had recourse to their indigenous languages in their literary works. Ngugi Wa’Thiongo is one such writer. His latter works starting with *Caitani Mutharabaini* translated as *Devil on the Cross* (1980) were written in Gikuyu. Other writers have had their works translated from English to other languages though these languages are mostly European, very few of their works are translated into indigenous languages. Among the women writers, only Nawal el Saadawi writes in her native Egyptian Arabic language through which means she is able to reach the generality of women. The advantage of Arabic here is that as a universal language of the Islamic religion, both men and women are schooled in it. Her novels are then later translated into English. Language therefore is an area that writers who want to reach the majority of women should look into.

The second solution to a wider reach of women is through theatre and film.¹⁵ Drama and the theatre have a wider audience and appeal with the visual aesthetics and the inclusion of music

¹³ Githae Micere Mugo, “Women and Books” in *Mapping Intersections: African Literature and African Diaspora* eds. Anne V. Adams and Jamie A. Mayes (New Jersey: African World Press, 1998) 52

¹⁴ Mugo, “Women and Books,” 52

¹⁵ One example is Sembene Usmane’s film *Moolade* (2004) whose central theme is female circumcision and other forms of subjugation that women face in society. He cited his film in a remote village in Burkina Faso and used the Jula language, a popular kind of the Bambara language in the Francophone countries of West Africa.

and dance. The message is quickly transmitted. This second option is expensive and investors have specific objectives and targeted audiences and peasant women are not part of their audience. Still, in a predominantly oral society as obtains in most African villages, oral communication, word of mouth remains a sure but limited means of transmitting information.

Conclusion

African literature has been enriched by the voices of women expressing their concerns. From 1966 to the present, various inhibitions and encumbrances of women exercising their human rights have found expression in the literature especially in fiction written by women. Generally, their output has been feministic in portraying the female characters' various reactions to a subsuming life. It is seen from their various discourses that feminism is not found only among the city-dwellers and educated women but among the rural and unlettered women. It does appear that male chauvinism makes no such distinctions, both categories of women come under the masculine yoke. The only difference is that the educated women are able to free themselves from this masculine yoke quickly because of the economic empowerment education bestows on them. So women's education and economic viability are emphasized as means of women's reification. There is need also to remove the immoral and murderous options in women's strive for rights because the presence of only two genders leaves no room for mediation so it becomes rationally expedient that both have to come together in mutuality and work out their differences.

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