

The African woman: from traditionalism to modernity

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ABSTRACT: *Existence for an African woman is shrouded in layers of assumptions. In the traditional African context, life to a woman is problematic and controversial. But in a modern society, it is a billowing soft, profound and exciting experience. The debates between these two worlds of the African woman offer a dynamic field for a comparative reflection on these worlds. Several other researchers have argued the plight of the African woman but their arguments seem to be one sided. However, the status of the African woman has not remained static. Modern literary works have depicted some kind of dynamisms in her status. It is on this premise that this study seeks to explore the contrasting images of the African woman captured in African fiction and also to clarify their relationships. This work hopes to achieve this using Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*.*

Introduction

The controversy that surrounds the life of an African woman is whether gender is genetically programmed or environmentally induced. Are women by nature weak and inferior to men or is it society that conditions them that way? Why can't a woman be a warrior or a trade union leader or even the king of a community? Are the roles that men and women play a function of their biology? Do their biological differences make them unequal or one subordinate to the other? To all these questions I have these to say:

In most cases women are seen as weak and inferior because society conditions them that way. Society weakens women: they are not born weak and inferior. As a matter of fact, women can be warriors or even community leaders if they are given the opportunity and the training as it is the case of men. In Plato's *Republic*, women went to war and fought like men because they were given the same training with their male counterparts. Women, in Literature, have shown that there is nothing wrong with their nature and they have also proved the common saying that what a man can do, a woman can do even better.

Penda in *God's Bits of Wood* leads the women to Dakar and fights like a man. Even when the soldiers order them to go back she replies, we will pass if we have to walk on the body of your mother'(201). She is courageous and determined as well. She says no to the limitations of society on women.

In *Achebe's Anthills of Savannah*, we see another character, Beatrice, who travels outside and study English and makes a first class. She pulls out of societal siege and actually achieves that which men think only them can achieve and that is academic excellence.

The roles women play are not purely a function of their biology and this also goes for the men. As a result of biology, they are unequal in terms of physical strength. It is society that imposes all these on the woman. Moreover, differences do not signify inequality. Society upholds male domination and this is the cause of women not given as much freedom as the men in family and national matters. This results in a struggle, the men strive to maintain their position while women strive to change theirs.

Review of Criticism and Justification

Before western civilization was felt in Africa, women performed a well defined role in society. Her role in society fitted in with the Biblical injunction: "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over the wife just as Christ has authority over the church." (Eph. 5 v 22 and 23)

This biblical injunction seems to give strength to society's widely- accepted views that women should play second fiddle to men in every aspect of their existence. She is only supposed to be seen and not heard; to be present in society but at the same time remain invisible.

This notion of women's inferiority also holds in the Islamic religion where the veil worn by Muslim women indicates that 'they are present in a man's world but they are invisible' (Emecheta71).

In the Igbo setting, the inferior position of women can be seen in the area of marriage. Very many young girls are given away in marriage when they are not mature enough to take their own decisions. Their parents take the decisions for them. This practice does not give children opportunity to attain full maturity, so as to be able to carry the responsibilities of a woman at home. Parents also tend to show some kind of discrimination between their male and female children. This is exhibited in the duties that are assigned to the children at home. Boys do not take part in any domestic chores when there are girls in the family.

This discrimination between male and female children in a family became more pronounced when western civilization was introduced in Africa. Only the males were given the opportunity to be educated. The society saw the education of the males as more important, a means which would help them fend for themselves in later life. On the other hand, the education of the females is seen as a loss. It is considered a loss because as soon as a girl marries, she is no longer of

any use to her first family. The money that is spent on her education will then be seen as a waste. Ama Ata Aidoo relates that:

To be an African woman means daily waging of heroic struggles against the shackles of the negative tradition, muffling religion, overwhelmingly hostile natural forces and exploitative economic-political system that seek to silence them all together (157).

The woman is seen to be the property of her husband and forever dependent on him. She goes through pain and misery and humiliation when she is childless as the whole work of child bearing is left on her head and her husband is the Lord and master.

In Ferguson's views, 'the feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value... In short, they (women) are deprived of the worth of their sex' (37). What characterizes the life of a traditional African woman is 'lack of choice in motherhood, and marriage, oppression of barren women, and enforced silence' (Nwapa 91).

This despicable life and position of women is not static, it is gradually changing. Before the introduction of western civilization in Africa, some men and women in other countries of the world had begun to protest against denying women certain rights. Then came what is known today as the Feminist Movement. According to Chukwuma, H., "so many African men see feminism as a disorder, a deviation, an extremism associated with misguided, frustrated, or disgruntled women'. This movement among other things tries to secure recognition for women as equals with men. Since its inception in the 19th century in France, Feminism has sought for equality of the sexes by attacking the relegation of women to subordinate status. Filomina Steady in Davies posits that, "true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and determination to be resourceful and reliant" (35).

In African context, feminism is a call for a revolution in African society because of the patriarchal tendencies dominant there in. It also means a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being.

Western civilization brought a lot of changes to the status of women in Africa. Several traditional norms were displaced and women embraced western education. With the increasing opportunities that modern education gives to a woman, a new type of woman has arisen, 'She is called the career woman' (Nwapa 92). Today, we have women lawyers, doctors, teachers and even politicians. They can now contribute to the upkeep of the family and also participate in decision making in their towns and countries. In the traditional days, it would have been an offence which can only be forgiven by appeasing the gods,

'to suggest that a woman should sit in the council of elders which is the highest political unit in traditional Igbo society' (UgwuViii). Chukwuma stresses that, "women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier toward a fulfillment of self. This is seen in the religious, socio-cultural and economic life of women" (ix).

The Traditional African Woman

The negative female images in African Literature came as a result of the blatant oppression that women suffered in the traditional African society. They are seen as naive, unintelligent and inferior to men. Women in the traditional African society are shown as incapable of contributing much to the upkeep of their families. They are also seen as intellectually inferior to men. Consequently, women are not consulted when important decisions are being taken. There is not much interaction between men and women.

Several male African writers have debased the image of womanhood in their works. Nwapa captures it this way:

Ekewnsi's Jagua Nana is a prostitute; Wole Soyinka's Amope is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband; Achebe's Miss Mark does not hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives, J.P. Clark's Ebieri entices her husband's younger brother into sexual relationship. (91).

To men, this is all a woman can be. There is nothing positive about women. They are only there to cause problems for them. Some people say that women are curses on men and nothing good can come out of them. They are only there to procreate and when a woman fails in this most awesome duty of procreation, she is as good as dead. A childless woman is treated like one who has committed a serious crime. She is regarded as 'a dead end not only for the genealogical line but also for herself (Pauline 12). This is the very aspect of a woman's life that Emecheta tries to capture in her work, *Joys of Motherhood*.

In the above text, Buchi Emecheta projects female protagonists who struggle to assert their identity in a male-dominated world. The author depicts that the whole of a girl's life is one long preparation for the useful role she is expected to play. This role pertains mainly to marriage and child bearing. This can be seen in the novel where Ubani, in an attempt to console his friend, Nnaife, for the loss of his first child, Ngozi, expresses the roles of men and women in the traditional African society.

How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children, she is to bear the children and look after you and them... A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old (31).

There is also the emphasis on children. Life, to the traditional African woman is children. A woman's greatest aspiration, according to Chukwuma, is finding a mate and thereafter bearing children. Every other thing is secondary: education, career, material wealth, social recognition etc. A woman without a child is as good as dead. She is looked upon as a complete failure. Society believes that in any case of childlessness the woman is the guilty one. Nnuego's first husband, Amatokwu, portrays callousness and lack of consideration for a woman's feelings. On discovering Nnuego's barren state, he tells her brutally that she has to make way for a new life. And, as though that was not enough, he virtually turns her into the field and degrades her to the level of an unpaid labourer denying her of her rights. In a dehumanizing language, he says:

I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seeds on a woman who is infertile I have to raise children for my line... But now if you can't produce sons, at least you help harvest yams (32).

The woman is seen as an utilitarian object, not as having an essence of her own. She is only there for the things she can offer. The loss of womanhood comes with the inability to rear children. This is very well disclosed in Nnuego's statement after being rescued from her suicide bid having lost her child, Ngozi. She proclaims 'but I am not a woman anymore. I am not a mother any more' (62) and the entire people around agreed that a woman without a child for her husband is an unfulfilled woman.

Emecheta, in *Joys of Motherhood*, uses a character, Adaku, to project the injustice of society against women with only female children. There has just been a misunderstanding between Nnuego and Adaku, and to a large extent, Nnuego is at fault. But just because she has male children and Adaku does not have any living son, Nwakusor and their Ibuza elders in Lagos who have come to settle the quarrel rule in Nnuego's favour. Nwakusor then proceeds to reprimand Adaku with the following words:

Don't you know that you know that according to the custom of our people, you Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, is committing an unforgivable sin, I know you have children but they are all girls... the only woman who is immortalizing your husband name you make unhappy... (166).

From the above, it shows that the girl cannot immortalize the family name. But who said so? A girl can truly immortalize a name, it is just that society limits them from doing so. In *Achebe's Anthills of Savannah*, Beatrice gives the name Amaechina to the baby girl. The name means 'may the path never close' (222). She understands that just like a boy immortalizes a name, a girl can too.

The woman's image as captured in Emecheta's work is nothing to inquire after. It is neither promising nor attractive. The woman is seen as someone else's appendage, a man's property that can be thrown about any how, a baby producing machine and when it cannot produce, becomes less a woman or less human, and forever dependent on a man. This is why the author cries out to God in these words! "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human, not anybody's appendage". (186).

The Modern African Woman

In the days of our grandmothers, the general belief was that women should be seen but not heard. But in this modern day of ours, it has become women must be seen as well as heard.

Women have started to redefine life and themselves as they feel they should be presented. 'Women, have in course of time, moved from playing merely domestic roles to playing more important roles, including roles formerly strictly reserved for men' (Ugwu, 17). So many African governments use women as resources in nation building. 'There is new meaning to the life of women in Africa and a new image of sensibilities, possibilities and realities' (Nwapa94).

In most Igbo communities, women play the powerful role as 'Umuada' (all daughters born in that clan, both married and unmarried ones). They function very well in title-taking ceremonies and in peace keeping where they constitute the final court of appeal. When there are quarrels between husbands and wives, parents and children or even in a community at large, they are called upon to make peace. At home, they participate in their husband's decision making.

Ousmane, in *God's Bits of Wood*, shows us Penda, a woman who is determined to find a solution to the strike action embarked upon by the railway workers of Dakar Niger line. This strike action has been to compel their French employers to give them their working rights and benefits. These railway workers assert that the whites receive these benefits and therefore, they should be treated in the same way. The action of the novel moves from Bamako through Thies to Dakar. The strike of the railway workers in Bamako, Thies and Dakar brought a lot of hardship to all the families of the strikers. These hardships have a terrifying effect on the women whose men are suffering like this. Although the women of Thies, Bamako, and Dakar have not been consulted before the strike action, they still respond positively to the situation. They do not fold their hands and become on-lookers, unlike the women in *Joys of Motherhood*. They realize that their children must eat and so they proceed to do something. The way in which the women of Dakar attack and kill Magbique's ram, Vendredi, and fearlessly defy

the policeman who come to arrest Ramatoulaya portray them as people with one spirit. They also fight soldiers on horseback.

These confrontations do not change the minds of the French capitalists neither do the efforts of the children of Thies who are called apprentice improve the situation.

When all efforts on the part of the men to bring their employers to heed their demands fail, Penda, a young woman from Theis, creates a 'committee of women'. She first depicts qualities of good leadership while she supervises the sharing of foodstuffs among the families of the people on strike. It is at the unsuccessful meeting between the delegates of those on strike and the personnel director, Monsieur Edoward, that Penda moves forward and addresses the crowd,

Yesterday, we all laughed together, men and women and today we weep together, but for us women this strike means the possibility of a better life tomorrow... so, we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to Dakar (185).

No woman in *Joys of Motherhood* has the courage to appear and address men on any occasion. What Penda does is not usual in Thies. Her courage becomes the talk of the town and the author captures it this way, "It was the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in Theis and even the onslaught of night could not still the arguments". (185)

The ability to take control of critical situations and take quick and right decisions is fully tested in Penda on three incidents that happened simultaneously. In one swift movement, Penda tries to revive Seni who has convulsions, save Yaccine from other women who are hurling stones at her because she is believed to have an evil spirit, and finally stops Awa's persistent shouts by beating her up thoroughly. This confusion and uproar could have destroyed the good spirit with which the women started the march but for the mature way Penda control the situation.

When they are close to the Dakar's city gate, the rumour about armed soldiers frighten the women but Penda reassures them, 'Don't be afraid, our friends are in Dadar, we will go on' (201). At the gate, the women are ordered by the soldier to go back to Thies. 'We will pass if we have to walk on the body of your mother!' cries Penda (201). At this instant, two shots tear through the crowd killing Penda and Samba N'Doulougou. Penda does not enter the city of Dakar. Yet, her spirit of determination lets the rest of the women into it. Their entry into the city and their wonderful performance there make an impact on the rest of the Africans working for the French. Their long march generates sympathy and a general strike is embarked upon throughout Dakar. As Bakayoko puts it, 'it depends on you workers of Dakar whether our

wives and children will ever see a better life' (218). It is after the general strike that the French capitalists meet with the demands of their employees.

The role women play in this novel is new and important. The qualities lacking in the women in *Joys of Motherhood* are highlighted here. Penda is an intelligent and courageous woman. In Nwapa's comment on the novel she says that:

Women are projected as full and complete. They provide role models for the female leadership. No more as victims of male subjugation in patriarchal society; but as full woman-beings who take up their rightful positions in the society, (95).

These women are the real power behind the struggle for independence. The successes of the railway workers strike is the good work of the women. They scout for food and water, they fight the police, they march on to Dakar, their sheer number breaking the power of the colonialists. After the strike, the men learn a hard lesson, that is, never to undertake any major issue or project without first consulting the women. In Labbiih's letter to Bakayoko, he states, 'in future though, we will have to reckon with them in whatever we do'(226).

Women are thus seen as possessing different talents. It is simply a question of giving them the opportunity and they will employ their talents creatively.

Conclusion

Katherine Frank posits that 'the native sounding woman who does not want to change and is happy with no innovations does not exist any longer!'(2). A new image of the African woman has emerged and a new definition is given to the lives of women. Women now actively participate in public and private affairs of society. Certainly, no nation can develop effectively without the aid of their women. Women contribute in no small way to a country's development.

Women are no longer seen as naive, unintelligent, immoral and crafty, but as intelligent, resourceful, and brave beings ready to make their society better. I will like to conclude finally in Laurretta Ngoobo's words,

Women should not have to die to win the respect of their societies, we are looking for self-defining image of women who win respect in their own right because they are strong and achieve things in their lives and triumph, not only because they are men's wives or mothers of sons but because they are valued members of their society as bread winners, teachers, farmers, nurses, politician and whatever else (151).

The African woman should now throw off the past negative impressions about her and move forward to self-actualization.

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