

Female Assertiveness in Ifeoma Okoye's The Fourth World

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Abstract

Most literary works by emerging African female writers react against the stereotypical portrayal of the female and womanhood in male-authored novels. In the previous works by male writers, women are perceived to be inferior, or projected as sex objects for the pleasure of the men, or even mere objects for the production of children. Such male writers have succeeded in constructing the image of the woman whose destiny is linked to that of a man. However, with the influx of western- oriented ideologies such as feminism and its African variants such as womanism, most female writers reject this stereotype and construct an alternative image of womanhood in which women are in charge of their own affairs. In the last decade, African female writers have attempted to restructure the style and issues of their works. These writers present new perspectives to the diverse issues of womanhood and the female identity in a changing social setting with the intention of giving the African woman the zeal, determination and courage to stand up against all societal challenges. Using Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*, this paper seeks to examine society's perception of women as regard their socio-culturally destined roles, their struggles, decisions in life and aspirations. The paper adopts the Womanist literary approach to analyse the text and it is discovered that the 21st Century African women, represented by the leading female character in the text, are more determined and assertive compared with the portrait of women projected in the works of previous male African authors.

Introduction

The common feature of African society, apart from the peculiarity of socio-political abnormalities, is patriarchy. Patriarchy is a form of sociological stratification that exalts the male gender over the female. It delineates the society along gender lines thereby assigning roles to a particular gender thus causing discrimination, suppression and injustice to the other gender. Due to the patriarchal nature of African societies, the African woman is considered as both

physically and socially inferior to men. For instance, because she is seen inferior to men she must recognise and accept her ordained secondary position without questions. African women have been domesticated by the African tradition and are „expected to look up to their men folk as towers of strength and sources of inspiration, guidance and succour“ (Johnson, 25). Pioneer African male writers mirrored patriarchy in their works. Remi Oriaku rightly puts it when she posits of this early literature thus:

In text after text the man is made the subject of the narrative, he is significant and dominate other people. Because he is invariably the central character, the lives of the other characters- the other male characters who serve as his foils or the women and children whose significance lies in their dependence on him are much less fully realized. (72)

Some writers show that traditional African society has encouraged the long cultural practices with regard to the conception and perception of the women's position in the society, K. Frank makes the point concerning the position of women clearer by arguing that even in the male authored novels women are seen as „Someone's daughter or wife or mother; shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, plating their hair“ (5). This suggests that women are of slight relevance and importance when portrayed as mothers whose pride rest in the matrimonial homes. The objectification of women in the novels of most of the early male authors is the „new African women's quarrel.“ Feminist see such portrayal as a deliberate masculine attempt to subjugate women.

In defence of the allegation against male authors, Oladele Taiwo, rationalises the inferior portrayal of the image of women by saying that there is the need to point out that because male writers were early in the field they have projected an image of the woman which female writers have found rather distasteful. He further adds that: „It is not always that male writers have been biased. They have merely presented the female social situation as it is. This is why for the most part a woman occupies a position of inferiority since the writer is anxious to be faithful to the realities of the world he portrays“(14).

It is this patriarchal tradition which considers women as mere appendages to the men that is largely responsible for the biased and one-sided portrayal of African women in African literature. Taiwo's assertions confirm women's secondary place in the society, being acquired as it were by the man to help him

procreate and cater for the children and the home. And like Leslie Molar Ogundipe opines, the African woman whose consciousness has been aroused sets out to search for justice.

The liberation of women in society is not simply about sexual freedom for women as most men tend to think and fear, but about the larger problem of redistribution of privilege, power and property between the rich and the poor, encompassing the smaller problem of redistribution of power, property and privileges between men and women. (135)

According to Ogundipe, the African woman's search for identity becomes a continuous process since she is traditionally reduced to a housewife and relegated to the background. The men, in most traditional African societies have the final say over cultural, political and social matters.

The emergence of female writers in African literature has been dominated by male writers and critics in diverse ways. Some see it as an attempt to rub shoulders with superior male, some other critics see it as offensive, the attempt of female writers to showcase their concern and the dilemma of the African woman under the system of patriarchy in their literary works. These men see every such move as challenge to their authority. But as far as the African woman is concerned,

The expression of femaleness and the struggle for self-assertion did not come from the west. She is aware of her womanism as the totality of her self-expression and self-realization in diverse positive ways. This involves eliciting women's positive qualities, ability, self-enhancement, self-esteem and freedom within African cultural context...so they are not seeking to be like men, look like men or necessarily act like men. (27)

This focus as encapsulated by Kolawole is evident in contemporary female writings, especially in the last few decades. These female writers attempt to use their fictional writings to review the plight of the African woman, through disarming traditional, cultural and social structures against women's development as well as providing alternatives. They have therefore gone ahead in their writings to present not just female characters but noble female characters. This is to tell the African woman to wake up from her slumber, explore her individuality, and discover her potentials. Finally, to live her life rather than let the society live it for her. In Okoye's *The Fourth World*, the author looks at the roles and analyses the struggle the woman faces in order to find her rightful place in the society. She

uses her protagonist and other female characters to project these issues and viewpoints.

The Fourth World

The novel, *The Fourth World* revolves round the life of Chira, a girl from a poor background and home who faces hardships and struggles to make a living. In the words of Richard Griggs in Onyemachi the term „The Fourth World“ designates the poorest and most underdeveloped states of the world ... any oppressed or underprivileged victim of a state“ (349). Onyemachi Nkiru further adds that:

Okoye“s view corroborates this definition as she presents *The Fourth World* as a novel that depicts the poorest in the country where the basic amenities and structures tend to be luxury amongst the inhabitants of the area. The novel portrays an environmental damaged society, neglected or probably abandoned by the government, where the survival of the people depends not only through their struggles but by grace (349)

The novel is set in the Eastern part of Nigeria, Enugu, with a fictional location named Kasanga Avenue „otherwise known as The Fourth World or Urban Jungle by snobs“ (103). It focuses on the day-to-day struggles and challenges faced by „the wretched of the earth“ especially by a young girl called Chira who is the heroine of the novel. At a young age, Chira is not only saddled with the responsibility of caring for herself but also for her mother Kodili, who refuses to undertake any responsibility of providing for the family after the death of her husband. She felt shattered and hopeless. Her life seems to come to a standstill. The place where she lives did not give her any opportunity to be strong again;

Kasanga Avenue was a destroyer of people“s bodies and minds. Living there meant not being able to see a doctor because there is no money. It meant not having a good job or not having a job at all because of a lack of education or skill. It meant losing children to illnesses because of dearth of clean water, a filthy environment and insufficient proper food. Kasanga Avenue was a maximum security prison for people who had committed the crime of allowing them to be born into poverty. (95)

Kasanga Avenue, the fourth world or urban jungle (101) is another name for urban slums where life“s prospects are small and opportunities are too slim for its inhabitants, especially the restless young, who want to escape from it for a better

life elsewhere. It is the home for the unskilled, uneducated workers, a place for those without any means of advancing themselves in the social ladder. It is the home of Chira, a beautiful, brilliant and an ambitious eighteen-year-old final year student at FGSS, Owerri. She travels from her school to Enugu, to visit her father who is seriously ill and admitted to a government hospital.

The hospital provides nothing, my daughter...The patients provide everything they need. I've brought tablets, injections, plasters, for your father's treatment. Everything, Chira, even cotton wool. The nurses always tell me that the medicines are not there in the hospital's...(43)

At the hospital, the rich and the poor are treated differently. The nurses and matrons treat rich patients and their relatives differently, and are antagonistic to help-needing poor people like Chira, when she comes to her father, the nurse yells at her refusing to allow her into the ward but Chira was determined and she forced her way in. She was surprise when they allowed „the man... dressed in a traditional outfit of rich textured brocade“ into the ward. „His movements seemed ostentatious and exaggerated to her, the type of swagger some people acquired as they climbed the social ladder according to one of our teachers at FGSS“ (2). This man is treated well by the nurses, matrons and other workers of the hospital. Her father, Akalaka, though poor, believes in his daughter and wants her to go far in life. In spite of his abject poverty, as a precarious labourer for hire, he starves himself and his wife just to see that Chira gets good education, as the only ticket to a better life his.

With the death of Akalaka, Chira is unable to continue her education. Gender inequality is viewed as a major concern in the novel because it aids in building up the succession of events in the novel. In a bid to erase the part of culture which promotes the oppression of the female gender, Opara asserts that „Armed with the pen, the African female writer views female solidarity and integrative education as the bulwark against retrogressive cultural patterns and ignorance“ (17).

Most of the women at Kasanga Avenue lack the power and strategies in family planning due to how the society has shaped them. To the society, their major role in the family is childbearing and this is why they are not given an adequate education or skill training that can fetch them a better income. They undertake jobs that fetch very little income in the family, thus, suffering more when their husbands die. The cultural practice of the people also restricts them

from making major decisions and carrying out tasks which are reserved for the male gender. Chira's unsuccessful attempt in carrying out her father's last wish throws more light on the discrimination against women in inheritance of land. She is chided by her uncle, Amos, when she raises the issue of mortgaging her father's share of land to cover the burial expenses and further her education as instructed by her father on his death bed „I said shut up before you make our ancestors turn in their grave! Your father must have suffered from flash of insanity to say that to you. Women don't have any say in family land matters. They are not even allowed to be present when land matters are discussed...I will hold his share of the family land in trust for your brother, Nodu, until he becomes a man" (83). Though she bears the burden of soliciting for help in the transportation of her father's corpse and making arrangements for a proper burial, her younger brother who has contributed nothing due to his absence and age is preferred for such discussion because of the gender preference by the culture of the society. Her inability to mortgage the land leaves her in more debt and her uncle who mortgages it to himself refuse to account for the money. This depicts one of the major problems generated by gender inequality and the atrocities committed by some greedy men under the guise of culture. Due to the effect of this inequality in gender relations, Chira has to drop out of school and could not secure a job. She is refused employment by a male manager just because of a general misconception of her gender. Her uncle denies her access to her father's lands; she drops out of school a year before she is to finish. Chira finds things to be worse; she does not just drop out of school; she and her mother are unable to fend for themselves.

Akalaka's death drains her mother and she gradually succumbs to hypertension. Having dropped out of school, Chira has no other option but to look for a job. But jobs, as in other places and Enugu, are hard to come by. She tramps the streets endlessly. Her friend, Ogom, whom she met at FGSS, is from an affluent home. Ogom is the light-headed type and so Chira helps her out. In return, Chira gets help from Ogom in her moments of need.

Marriage to some women is a self-fulfillment and an escape from sufferings in their environment; but this is not always the case because they end up experiencing worse situation and in many cases lose their own identity. Kodili marries Akalaka with the support of both families and without any prior knowledge of him. To her, marriage is like „an escape from a home where laborious work and hunger were constant tormentors" (17). But instead of getting

that escape, she becomes even more entangled in suffering and poverty. Mama Egodi, who marries at a tender age under the pressure of her mother, ends up with regret, poverty and widowhood; she loses two out of her three children to an accident while they are hawking to make ends meet even when there is a law against child labour in the state. Unlike these two female characters, Chira sees marriage differently. She believes that one has to marry the person one shares same interest with. She does not accept the action of her rich cousin, Osima, who stops his wife from attending school and prevents her from going out after marriage thus, „stripping her of her identity and making her a prisoner in his house“ (202). Chira sees marrying Maks „like being in a prison so to speak. He would take away her freedom. He would kill her ambition. He would submerge her values under his“ (312). She turns down his proposal, against her mother’s wish, because they share different ideology or perception on marriage and life in general. His chauvinism is such that denies women any form of personal development. He is uneducated and so does not see any need for his wife to go to university, as Chira aspires. But Chira is different, she believes in personal development. She has her teacher back at FGSS, Miss K to thank for her independence of mind that Maks seeks to deny her. Her environment does not subdue her to accept Maks as a means for survival; rather it gives her the zeal to struggle for freedom, self- actualization and self-identity. Unlike her friend, Ogom, she will not marry any man just to escape poverty. Marriage, according to her, should be made of more than a man’s dubious riches. Her friend, who rushes into marriage to escape school, finds to her horror in the United States the other side of life. To her surprise, Chike’s son is married to an arranged American wife, who threatens to report Chike’s son to the authorities if he ditches her. Ogom is stranded on arriving Washington but met a fellow woman, who had her own dark past with her man, and who eventually rehabilitates Ogom. Chira finds redemption in Dr. Agali, a woman who believes in her and offers her a job in a computer firm. Chira would have to be taught first before she can perform her duties. Her determination leads to success due to her intelligence and capabilities. It is also through Dr. Agali that Chira eventually finds a ray of hope for a future she has dreamt so much about.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Okoye presents a strong and determined female character;

Chira who is not intimidated by the problems surrounding her but is resolute in achieving her goals which include getting a job and achieving a successful higher education. After reading the novel, *The Fourth World*, I have come to the conviction that a woman, whether traditional or modern is the creator of her destiny. It becomes necessary for a woman to go to school in order to snatch her rights of good living condition and emancipation from a selfish society. Women, like Chira must struggle hard to attain success. Education appears to be a necessity for women in order to overcome male chauvinism. It is also worthy noticing that a woman must be courageous, determined and has her target at stake like Chira. All in all, my contention, in this paper is that education is and will be the remedy to the problems of women within a society because it will assist them to attain success and also to be confident in their behaviour and style.

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