

TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF THE IMAGE OF AFRICAN FEMALES THROUGH THE AGES: AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED LITERARY WORKS

Ebele Peace Okpala

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

Corresponding Author*

Ebele Peace Okpala

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Abstract: The image of African women has evolved over the years. The study traced and critically analyzed how African female persona and experience have been depicted starting from pre-colonial, colonial to post-colonial eras using selected literary texts. It highlighted the impacts made by feminist writers towards a re-definition of the African woman. The theoretical framework was hinged on Feminist theory. Feminism, feminist ideologies and their proponents were also highlighted. The research revealed that the image of pre-colonial and colonial African women as portrayed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, El Saadawi's *The Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* among others was ascribed a second class status. The Post-colonial African women have come to the awareness of their rights and roles through the numerous intellectual and political campaigns of African

feminist writers. Their image has changed from being in the kitchen, bearing and rearing children to also shouldering responsibilities as most powerful men in the community as depicted in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of the Yellow Sun* among others. The study recommended the acquisition of good education and self-development as the major strategies to confront the impediments orchestrated by patriarchy.

Keywords: African women, Patriarchy, Image, Experience, Feminism.

Introduction

African women are always at the fringes of their communities' activities and never part of the decision-making process, even when their interests are at stake. In fact, little is seen, heard, and talked about them. They are either farming, fetching water or firewood, plaiting their hair, cleaning their private or public huts; washing cooking utensils, being beaten by the father, brother or husband; running away from the masquerades, going or coming back from the market, bearing or rearing children... (Orabueze 137)

In traditional African society, young males are trained to be aggressive and fearless leaders in modern society. They are not trained to be responsible fathers and caring husbands. For the girls, the emphasis is laid more on good behaviors, cleanliness, obedience, and hard work (Apena 282). This aims at creating marital harmony in the future home.

Utoh-Ezeajugh records that:

In the social structure of most African societies, men are groomed from birth to imbibe an attitude of supremacy over women, who are then nurtured to feel and act inferior to men. In operating within the sphere of social conventions and cultural restrictions, the woman is regarded as being less intelligent, less creative, less productive and of less economic value and by implication, of less social value than men. (136)

Unfortunately, conflict erupts in the marital relationship when the women refuse to accept such a status quo and demand a share of the male-dominated power.

Ever since 1782, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in England, in which she portrays men as tyrants, women have been fighting for equal economic, socio-political, and legal rights with men. This struggle is also expressed in the works like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. In 1928, women won the right to vote. Tremendous changes were recorded as the image of women began to wear a new look.

On the literary front, female writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot began to display a high level of intellectualism in their projection of English Society. Politically, the first woman's rights convention led by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Stanton proposed the amendment of the American constitution to read, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all men and women* are created equal" (Nnolim 134). Similar submissions and demonstrations were recorded in Europe, Asia and Africa.

In Nigeria, feminism has a long history. Most of its movements are protest-based. They are usually resistant to the destructive socio-political system of the periods. In 1929, Aba Women demonstrated against the prevailing socio-political problem designed against them. The Egba women of Yoruba also fought against the flat tax rate. In 1944, Mrs. Fumilayo Ransom-Kuti formed the Abeokuta Ladies Club (ALC) which aimed at improving the standard of womanhood. The club was subsequently changed to the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS). Political activists like Queen Amina of Zaria, Margaret Ekpo, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, etc. participated fully in the modern nationalist movement. A better life for Rural Women, Poverty Eradication, etc were political programs designed to enhance the economic condition of rural women.

Brief Review of Feminist Theories

Feminism, which can be described as the organized movement which supports and promotes equality for men and women in political, social, and economic issues, has been critically extended into several theoretical schools. It encompasses work in a variety of disciplines; sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, women studies and literary criticism. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequalities and focuses largely on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. It provides a critique of these social and political reactions and focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. Themes such as discrimination, patriarchy, victimization, sexual oppression, etc are explored in feminist theory.

The feminist movement has produced a lot of feminist fiction and non-fiction and has created a new interest in women's writing. It also prompts a general reassessment of women's historical and academic contributions in response to the assertion that women's lives and contributions have been under-represented in areas of scholarly interest. The growth in scholarly interest even warrants the reissuing of long-out-of-print texts by various presses such as Virago Press and Pandora Press. Mary Wollstonecraft

wrote one of the first works of feminist philosophy, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which called for equal education in 1792 and her daughter, Mary Shelley also became an author, best known for her 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*.

The Australian feminist Germaine Greer, published *The Female Eunuch* (1970) which became an international best seller and an important text in the feminist movement. In the 1960s and 1970s, authors used the genre of science fiction to explore feminist themes. Notable in this genre were Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1970) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale*.

Apart from the above, several movements of feminist ideologies have over the years developed; these include; Liberal feminism; which seeks the individualistic equality of men and women through political and legal reforms without altering the societal structures. It further propagates the idea that total equality with men (in jobs and pays) must be realized or based on individual skill, expertise and proficiency. Alice Paul, Elizabeth Boyer and Judith Hole are the key proponents of this feminist ideology.

Socialist Feminism connects the oppression of women to exploration and labour. Socialist feminists are trade union oriented and urge for the emancipation of women from sexual abuse. Socialist feminists like Kate O'Hare, Allison Jaggar, Emma Goldman and Christine Obbo are the leading proponents of this (Nnolim 219).

Cultural feminism believes in making the best of what is biologically endowed with women. A woman is an inherently more kind and gentle. The world will be a better place, according to them, if women are given the opportunity to rule. Women uphold interdependence, co-operation, joy and trust while men value hierarchy, competition and dominion. The major advocate is Carol Gilligan.

Eco Feminism believes in the link between the woman and nature, hence the term Mother Earth. It seems men's control of the land as responsible both for the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment. It focuses mainly on the mystical connection between woman and nature. The major proponent is Van Dana Shiva.

These Feminist theorists have written so persuasively for the total emancipation of women and have depended on the merit of logic and legal means to convince men to see reason. African feminist scholars see feminism of the Western World as alien hence the reluctance to embrace it. This is partly because African society is made up of diverse cultures within its diverse regions. What is practiced in one region could be the opposite in another.

The image of African females

This study will trace and analyze how the image of the woman in the works of African writers evolved during the three stages of colonization-pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. It will equally look into the efforts made by feminist writers towards a re-definition of the image of the African woman.

Pre-colonial and Colonial Eras

During these periods, women were mostly docile, without formal education, and were made to believe that their primary assignment was to bear children. They were rural women indeed with no one to better their lives. Their occupations were mainly farming and trading. African female writers emerged in the 1960s. African males were the pioneer writers, their fictions were written to recapture Africa's image dented by colonialism and as such necessitated the heralding of masculine traditions leaving little or no room for female values. The identity of a woman then depended solely on her husband. If his name is

Okonkwo, she acquires a spurious and nondescript name *Nwunye Okonkwo* (Okonkwo's wife) (Adimora-Ezeigbo 116).

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, which records one of the earliest of the works of African fiction, women are given minor roles. The three wives of Okonkwo are numbered as part of his acquisitions;

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles... (7)

His wives are introduced by name, rank, and snippets of characters. Ojiugo, the youngest wife is beaten severely for going to "plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (23). Nwoye's mother, the first wife, tries to cover her. Ekwefi was Okonkwo's second wife, whom he nearly shot (31). When Okonkwo brought Ikemefuna home, "that day he called his most senior wife and handed him over to her" (12).

After the murder of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is heard cursing himself;

When did you become a shivering old woman, Okonkwo asked himself, you who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo you have become a woman indeed. (51)

Masculine roles are described with positive words like valour, logical, brave, trustworthy while of women are frickle, shivering, shallow or vain (Chefetz 41).

Elechi Amadi in his works portrays his men as a dignified group while his women are treated with disdain. His male characters consistently pass derogatory comments about their women. In *The Concubine*, for instance, Madume dismisses his wife with the statement, "women argue forwards and backward" (70). Wakiri confides in his friend Ekwueme, "when it comes to nagging I treat all women as children" (20). Wigwe advises his son to regard his wife as "a baby needing constant correction" (181). Almost all Amadi's female characters are depicted as inferior and subordinate to men. His heroine is all that a man would wish a woman to be. She must be endowed like Ihuoma, with the kind of physical attractiveness that will make a man proud to possess her.

Wole Soyinka is not left out in this. In his play, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), his most prominent characteristic of women is an extraordinary beauty, a beauty which will be possessed by the man. As his title suggests, the male is given the qualities of strength, bravery and expertise while the female is endowed with virtues of ornament or most valuable possession.

These African sexiest writers depict the woman as helpless and dependent, either prostitutes or housewives destined in the words of Ogunyemi to "carry yam and foo-foo to men discussing important matters".

During the pre-colonial and colonial periods also, a tradition of "female husband and male daughter" is adopted to ease the pain of not having a male child (Adimora-Ezeigbo 31). A girl could be made to marry so that her bride price could be used for the sustenance of her male siblings like Ogwoma in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Most husband/wives relationships were like that between a Headmaster and his pupils. Most homes were like luxurious prison where indices of battering abound. Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, "ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives especially

the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children” (II). He gave his second wife a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping, for merely cutting a few leaves from banana tree to wrap some food (30) while his other wives hover around mumbling “it is enough, Okonkwo,” from a reasonable distance (31).

Eugene (Papa), in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, beats his wife (Beatrice) and she loses her pregnancy. With little or no provocation, he attempts to kill her, making her spend months, laying in coma for weeks at the hospital as she discloses;

Do you know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly... My blood finished on that floor even he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it. (248)

Beatrice could only respond to the crisis by only crying and remaining calm. Eke also supports that wife-beating is very common in many African countries and wives often condone such nefarious activities. Firdaus’ father in EL Saadiwi’s *Women at Point Zero*, constantly beats and punches his wife who willingly submits her body to him which he brutalizes her in order to appease his ego and emotions (179).

Through imposed African cultural practices, women in this period were repressed, “contained and monitored under the constant gaze of a male, first the father, their brother (where there is one), husband and sometimes the son” (Eke 50). They experienced a great deal of oppression. They were subjected to slavish levirate system, torturous and debasing widowhood practices whereby a widow may be required to drink *miliozu*, water used in washing the corpse of her late husband, like Anayo in Ifeoma Okoye; *The Trial and Other Stories*, to confirm that she had in no way contributed to his death. They may be, like Eziagba in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*, victims of *Nluikwa*, a system by which a lady will not be allowed to marry but stays back in her natal home to bear male children (Worgugi 142). These eras recorded the highest level of gender oppression. The cultural belief and practice of widow inheritance confirm the societal approval that women are nothing but properties or accessories that could be possessed or inherited.

Post Colonial Era

Tradition, beliefs and cultural practices in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras in Africa, bear traces of female marginalization. Nevertheless, the contemporary ‘liberated’ African woman is better than her pre-colonial and colonial counterparts. She has the benefit of formal education and the choice of who she marries, subject to her parents’ approval. She may, however, be battered by her husband depending on his temperament, but she can subvert the patriarchal order and move out of unhappy marriage, reject levirate marriage and sustain her family units (Molly Chilwa (100). Mariama Ba, in her *So Long a Letter*, decries polygamy as a sacrilege to the precepts of genuine marriages using Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou.

Nwapa writes to challenge the male writers and make them aware of women’s inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-confidence, desire for gain, and high social status. In her works, female characters are given a major role and the men are marginalized that they are barely noticed (Orabueze 138). Nnolim equally confirms that,

no woman in Nwapa’s novel is a parasite that depends on men for substance. If anything in *Idu*, it is the man who has no inner resources, who borrows money constantly from the wife, who when the wife deserts him hanged himself from the thatched roof of his hut. (196)

Nwapa explores the theme of moral laxity in her novels.

... but this is treated in response to earlier novels written by men where prostitution is always associated with women.... But in my novels, there is a reversal of roles-men are the prostitutes. In *Women Are Different*, Chris, Dora's husband, is a male prostitute, kept by a German woman. Ernest, Rose's former boyfriend, goes from one woman to another without finding satisfaction., Amaka is in control of her relationship with the Alhaji and Reverend Fr. Maclaid (in *One is Enough*). The men have lost the initiative, always on the move, finding it impossible to settle down anywhere. (97)

She creates sophisticated female protagonists-beautiful, intelligent and rich by all standards. In her works, women rule and control the market place of their world. Mothers are positioned as prime movers and sole agencies who exploit their traditional role and power to control their men. She tries as much as possible to rebrand the seemingly disparaged African woman. She captures this vision in an essay. "So while some Nigerian male writers failed to see this power base, this strength of character, this independence, I tried ... to elevate the woman to her rightful place ... I tried to analyze the woman's independent economic position and the power she wields by the mere fact that she controls the pestle and the cooking pots" (528).

Nwapa portrays women as humane, fearless and courageous in moments of crisis in her *Wives at War and Other Stories*. They are better managers of difficult times than men. As Ibiyemi Mojola observes that "fictional narrative is often generated by life experiences and women writers in West Africa regularly focus on women's condition in their works of fiction". (10)

Kaine Agary in her *Yellow-Yellow*, fights a twin war of violence against Niger Delta environment and violence against women. She agrees with Nwachukwu-Agbada who believes that "Africa cannot be free until her women are free" (3). Agary links the destruction of Niger Delta region with the violation of a woman.

Chimamanda Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus*, presents a more ideologically protesting stance of the woman before her men. She fights against the unfriendliness, cruelty and brutality of man against the woman. She seems to pull down the wall of patriarchy. Beatrice (Mama) and Kambili are the most suppressed, silenced, and brutalized, physically, psychologically and emotionally in the novel. Eugene (Papa) is the symbol of patriarchy whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps the women under tension and fear. Kambili laments "Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times as though it came in different flavours and colour. (196). She finds herself perpetually in the danger zone as Papa beats her at any slightest provocation. She is caged to the extent that she is starved of social life. She is forced to live a silent, silenced life. She lacks voice on what to say, she only has to wish or would have wanted. She cannot answer Amaka (her age mate cousin) back; "I stood there, staring at her, wishing Aunty Ifeoma were there to speak for me" (141).

At Papa's death, Beatrice (Mama) and Kambili get their freedom and liberation. Mama fires Kelvin their chauffeur and replaces them with Celestine. Kambili now talks aloud and controls the family wealth. Adichie conveys that the death of Papa (symbol of patriarchy) is the only factor that will; restore the image, voice and freedom of women in Africa.

In *Half of the Yellow Sun*, Adichie creates women of substance, who, as Nnolim observes, no longer carry foo-foo and soup to men discussing important matters. Olanna and Kainene, having been educated abroad, are assertive and meet men of their dictates(4). Beatrice in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the*

Savanah, is a professional who operates on the same wave-length as the most powerful men in the land (Charles Fonchingong 145).

Adichie advises Ijeawele to teach Chizalum, from the cradle, that a girl should be seen as an individual, not a girl who should behave in a certain way. Domestic work and care-giving should be gender-neutral. A father should do all that biology permits, which is everything except breastfeeding(2). She maintains that in raising a child, especially in this era, people should focus on ability and interest instead of gender, because gender prescribes how we should be, rather than recognizing how we are. Baby girls should be taught self-reliance and how to fix physical things when they break. They should be encouraged to speak their mind, be kind, brave and honest. Above all, they should be made to study, to be able to understand, question their world, express themselves and achieve their desired ambitions.

Conclusion

African female writers like Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, Yvonne Vera, Zaynab Alkali, Tess Onwueme, Ama Ata Aidoo, Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland, Mariama Ba, Chimamanda Adichie, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo, Ann Iwuagwu, etc have extensively explored the female experience in their male-dominated society. They create a woman's world in which female characters exist in their own right, not as mere appendages to a male world (Horne 120). The method and manner by which they project the image of the woman, her economic independence, her relationship with her husband and children and her position in society has, however, been criticized by some scholars.

Acholonu for instance, argues that what affects development in African society is not gender-related but economic power. She believes that a rich and educated woman who is outspoken, hardworking and fearless can hardly be suppressed by any member of her society. Nnolim condemns their scandalous, criminal and murderous levels (217). They are indicted for promoting self-actualization and emancipation through immorality.

Nevertheless, the African female authors have achieved a remarkable level of success in such a way that the image of the women is no longer placed at a disadvantaged position. For instance, the supreme court of Nigeria, declares as repulsive, in the article "Supreme Court Scraps Customs Disinherit Women", the custom that disinherits married women because they do not have a child for the late husband. (Soniya 1) Women, according to Uzoamaka Azodo, "... are expressing their resentment of beating, sexual abuse and sexual harassment. In addition, they are seeking custody of their children after separation instead of automatically handing them over to their ex-husband and his family" (250).

African women are still vocal with their pains and joys, they assert themselves through their determination to take charge of their lives, they attempt to control their destinies as far as that is possible. While we eulogize these African feminist writers for their achievements, it is also important that we pinpoint some of their excesses which should be avoided for women's struggle to retain its justification. Examples include hatred for men, rejection of motherhood duties, and drive to be like men.

They also mistake uniformity for equality. To them, the equality of man and woman means that husband and wife must share every aspect of the household work and childcare mathematically equal. Again, they seem to forget that as long as pregnancy and lactation are the special preserve of women, that men and women cannot have a uniform duty in childcare. (Nnamani 221)

Despite criticisms, African female writers, continuously portray the pains and experiences of women of various generations, classes, and social statuses to enhance their effort towards reconstituting the biased

presentation of female persona in their creative works. They are gradually transforming the status of the pre-colonial and colonial women from a subordinate position of the old order to a rank of competent independent and focused women of substance.

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