Gender Politics and the Consciousness of Representations: A Study of African Women's Writings

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Abstract

The systematic formation of African women's writing across the decades and the expression of the different themes of each generation shows moments of nervous conditions in the struggle for emancipation through creativity. Critics address issues of gender dichotomy and the ripple effects of discrimination in relation to signifying gender myths that are reflected onto African tradition. The historical stages and its influence on the economic, social, religious and political affairs relating to women suffer setback. The shift from traditional standpoint on issues of representations centres on the irregularities about the women question. It shows the development from issues of victimization of women that dominate women's writings to the improvement on the power of the culture of resistance. The theoretical framework for the study hinges on the feminist and postmodern theories to show the progression of women from the period of write backs to correct several misconstrued issues to more radical and creative involvement on national struggles as the platform for the transformation. The evolution experience the intermingling of the subject matter in the different decades to show conscious expansion, resistance and escape from conventions of pioneer female writers concerns on image laundering and subjugation. In the end, the transition shows great advancement because of the steadfastness in the change agenda and that is the crux of the study.

Key words: Nervous conditions, Victimization, Postmodernism, Gender politics, Resistance.

Introduction

The neglect of gender as a critical division of society, underscores the challenges of representation and literature is one of the most efficient means of addressing these problems. As aspects of the systematic study of the culture, the different genres of literature play major role in changing some of the global perspective of women since the early 1950s and it is attributed to colonial intervention because of the consciousness of issues of representation. It shows that more women embrace formal education and writes their stories to attract global attention. This is not in any way exonerating the pre-colonial era, when oral nature of literature dominates the continent. In fact, the anxieties of colonialism and postcolonialism not only position the African tradition as the focal point of development but create the awareness and involvement of women in the affairs of society.

The issue of gender is a global predicament and it is not necessarily peculiar to Africa or other developing continents. In Africa, the issues of gender spans beyond mere rhetoric to representations that affect the socio-political, economic and religious affairs of the people because of the nature of the depiction of the women in the literary tradition. The issues of gender politics and representation are certainly of great concern and relevance to women and society due to the fact that both male and female African writers faced hurdles in the process of writing, though women face more prohibitions. It shows the overriding concerns in terms of identity politics and the account of African women.

The development and consciousness of gender politics and representations linger during post colonialism because of the vestiges of the practices of the colonists that could not easily fit into the traditional life-style of the indigenous people and the issues of neo-colonialism. It shows the challenges the intervention of foreign culture to African tradition contribute to issues of representations. This study therefore, examines the chronological formation of African women literature to show the historical developments from stages in relation to gender politics and representations. It shows the sequential formation of African women's writing in particular, prose across the decades.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the theories of feminism and postmodernism to echo the bravery of African women writers in the present dispensation. Feminism and postmodernism emerged as studies in literary discourse and in particular, women literature. Both ideologies gain momentum in the 1960s in reflecting the challenges of gender demarcations due to the identification and restrain of the barriers in gender matters in patriarchal

dominant societies. The women strategize by putting up resilient spirit to tackle the anxieties surrounding the feminist discourse in a postmodern era.

Sarah Schulman for instance, interrogates the Feminism questions, what do we ask of a mature feminist literature? How do we take our place in the literary life of the nation? (xi). Tim Woods describes feminism as "a pluralist enterprise", encompassing theorists, like Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Jane Flax, Seyla Benhabib, Rosi Braidotti and Moira Gatens, have been involved in the postmodernist discourse because of the dynamism in gender identities (38).

Chinyere Nwahunanya argues that feminism is saddled with the advocating for the downtrodden on the 'war of sexes' and highlight the rejected space of the women (32). He further asserts that feminism redefines and reexamines the essence of the female ideology (33). Onyemaechi Udumukwu states that the debate on feminism spans beyond sexual desires to issues of power (230). It shows that feminist discourse is misconstrued as women's strategic desire to crave for recognition and attention. M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham posit that:

> a number of feminists have concentrated, not on the woman as a reader, but on what Elaine Showalter named gynocriticism – that is, a criticism which concerns with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects their production, motivation, analysis and interpretation, and in all literary forms, including journals and letters." (123).

It shows that the basic concern of feminist critics is to develop the techniques of addressing issues of representations in justifying the female perspective and it shows the relationship between feminism and postmodernism.

The nexus between Feminism and Postmodernism are innovative obligation and obvious unanimity because both concentrate on discovery of germane ideologies. Woods states that since the 1960s the discourse on postmodernism has been extensive and varied in form of theory war (18). He explains that "if Jean-Francois Lyotard was the founder of this new French 'religion' Postmodernism, then Jean Baudrillard might be regarded as its high priest" (25). These Postmodern theories show the different and radical aspects of resistance from conventional structures and themes as alternative freedom of expression. M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham argue that:

> the term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art after the World War II (1939-45), when the effects of Western morale of the First World War were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation. (227)

It implies that the term postmodernism means different things to different people in different disciplines because of the uncertainty in the prefix (post) in postmodernism. For instance, unlike, the post in poststructuralist theory, which is the careful development of the inadequacies in the interpretation of the text, as structured by structuralism, the ideologies of postmodernism are far from modernism, despite the semblance.

The post in postmodernism neither indicates a preceding related ideological nor a continuation of growth of the existing belief. Postmodernism is viewed as a concept as well as a period after modernism because of the prefix post, which parallel Abrams and Harpham assertion that "postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernists forms which had inevitably, become in their turn conventional" (227). Postmodernism shows the diversion from conventional forms into radical approaches of breaking barriers to reflect the concerns of the downtrodden rather that the upper class contrary to earlier concepts.

The Politics of Representation and Periodization from the 1950s to 70s

The periodizing of the women writing is not in a straight line of order owing to the vested interest in issues of representation. The period from the 1950s is the era that provided the opportunity and forum for the agenda on the deliberations of the various definitions of African literature. In fact, this is the period of concern in Africa as the people await African writer's historical revolution so that they are self-assured and optimistic about independence in many parts of Africa. It is the period African writers address issues of colonialis and need for autonomous African states.

In 1960s, women writers such as Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966) and Bessie Head's When the Rain Cloud Gathers (1969) explore the female protagonist in representing the predicament of women in society. Nwapa, who is arguably Africa's acclaimed first published female novelist emerged in the scenario and started the theme of motherhood, womanhood in her writings to depict the sensibilities of the female protagonists of the socio-political implications. Head is one of Africa best acclaimed women writers, who in a diary report

form projects and provide voice to the female protagonist in the novel, Maria as the idealism of womanhood. It shows that women desire to tell their own side of the story as direct recipients of representation and to prove their ability of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood.

Elizabeth Ogini argues that the 1960s witnessed the establishment of more women movements and workshops are organized to create the desired awareness all over the world (11). There is a quantum shift in global consciousness in the realization of the women advocacy for equal opportunities for both sexes. S. I. Duruoha views Nwapa's effort as launching African women into the literary world "and bringing the Igbo culture into limelight" (126). It is arguably contestable because the daring authorship of the women literature transcends tribal sentiments but deserving global accolade capable of drawing attention and laundered the battered image of the woman. In the opinion of Chinyelu Ojukwu, the early female writers focus on the predicament of women due to cultural tenacity of society (9).

For instance, Nwapa's protagonist Efuru which is also the title of the novel and Head's *When the Rain Cloud Gathers* (1969), protagonist Maria, is a typical depiction of the African traditional woman. These pioneer female novelists are not included in the record of the development of African literature despite the fact that they both worked alongside their male nationalists in fighting for independence from the colonialist. Owning to the male domineering patriarchal oppression of women, the role of the latter in the ongoing history of African literature is undermined by the former. So that the periodization is based on men's writings, and in other words, African literature and the representation of the women are seen from the "male gaze". Although both writers came from different parts of Africa, they each reflected similar themes in their novels despite their differences.

Nwapa and Head are two of Africa's most profound and intense women writers, who asserted their voices and claimed an identity in African literature. They used the female protagonist in unique ways to represent victimization. Nwapa's typically concentrated on the concerns of wifehood and motherhood, Head's dealt with more complex concerns of dreadful rejection. These are reflections of the transition of African women writers from the older generation style of writing to a more radical aggressive and uncompromising approach. It is the period of the women writes back through female protagonists to correct the misconstrued cultural ideologies of the biological structure and capabilities of the woman.

The first generation of African women writers dealt with the concerns of the symbolism of womanhood and motherhood and they explored the female protagonist from a different perspective to the male point of view. For this reason, women were detached from men so that they remained relevant in society, exclusively and separately. This seemed to be the beginning of the battle of the sexes, owing to the fact that men used the stereotypical depiction, itself the vestige of cultural values.

In the 1970s, Head's A Question of Power (1974), Nadine Gordimer's A Guest of Honor (1970) suggest another dimension of narrating the ordeal of the woman. Head's A Question of Power (1974) represented the dilemma of identity in the apartheid era of South Africa. Head's protagonist Elizabeth is not as typical as Efuru, because of her educational background and awareness, yet she is still a victim of domestic violence, the result of societal ills and she left South Africa for relatively peaceful neighbouring Botswana. In spite of all the sufferings of Efuru and Elizabeth, they were able to struggle and liberate themselves from the restraints of tradition. Laurie Harris states that Gordimer's A Guest of Honor "reveals her fine eye for the details of speech and gestures that make her characters so believable" (145). The language of the women writers is unique in reflecting the characters.

Other African female novelists such as Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood (1979) emerged to change the narratives. Emelia Oko views Emecheta's narratives as functioning from a multi dimensional level in the investigation of the African woman's predicament (91). It explains the emergence of the women as an entity and not an appendage as propagated in the socio-cultural and religious settings. This second and subsequent generations of women writers developed new dimensions of representation and the dynamism of the female protagonist's victimization, in a rather contemporary radical approach.

Adichie emphasized the need for women to be self conscious, "motherhood is a glorious gift, but do not define yourself solely by motherhood. Be a full person" (5). Lami C. Adama posits that womanhood and motherhood are sacred and essential as well as exceptional responsibility placed on the African woman in a typical setting (302,3). In the words of Chimamanda Adichie "culture does not make people. People make culture. It ia true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture" (46). The study deals with the thematic transition and preoccupation of each decade from the 1950s, when African women literature gains recognition up to the present era to show the significance and update of the women question.

The focus is rooted on the socio-historical source of gender politics and postcolonial depiction of African women. Paul Opone states that the engaging and different views of history provide the needed opinions and facts as the "essential stimulant for a critical and mental development" (82). In fact, Chmamanda Adichie cautioned that "gender is not an easy conversation to have. It makes people uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable" (40). She explains that because of the annoyance and controversy generated in gender discourse, "some men feel threatened by the idea of feminism" (40, 42).

Thematic transition and preoccupation across decades of 1980s to 90s

By comparison, the decade of the 1980s served as the beginning and breakthrough for the new generation of African women writers. It is epoch-making as the surfacing of notable twentieth century radical writers such as Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* (1980), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983) and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), Zaynab Alkali's Stillborn (1984), Tess Onwueme's and *The Desert Encroachers* (1985), *Tell It to Wome*n (1987), *Mirror for Campus* (1987), and *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Their appearance to the literary scene changed the sequence of events in storytelling in rather aggressive manner.

They undoubtedly accosted diverse forms of oppression, which exposes the decade of 1980s as an exciting period in modern African literature for the massive representation of womanhood and the language of oppression. It is an historical era that launches African women writings into limelight, which is the beginning of breakthrough for the new generation of writers. These African female writers of the 1980s aimed at representing the fact that the masses are in control of the future that the theme and language is rooted in the everyday way of life. This is in line with postmodernism concept, which parallel Tim Woods argument that challenges the validity of "chronological models, the politics of categorization, and relationships with the styles of fictional precedents" (50). The twentieth-century African women writers have developed entirely new themes for their works. It shows satisfaction of academic attainment, as well as social power, as each writer reflects her own unique style and exploits her own gift in relation to her culture and time. They have expanded and improved on the plot so that the theme is contemporary and daring.

The 1990s improved on the preceding decades and expose the mythology of the superhuman nature of the woman. African female writers such as Yvonne Vera's Nehanda (1994), Tess Onwueme's The Broken Calabash (1994), Evelyne Accad's Wounding Words ((1996) and Tess Onwueme's Parables for a Season (1996) and The Missing Face (1997)

represented the role of the ancestors in the economic and socio-political atmosphere of African tradition. The two writers are also from different parts of Africa. Accad though born a Lebanese, but documents her experiences of times spent in Tunisia and Vera is from Zimbabwe. Each of them digressed from portraying issues of private life to a depiction of more public related matters. On the whole, they both deviated from mere representation of the woman. They delve into the current concerns of women's identity and the existing choice in terms of culture of the society. It shows that the twenty-first century African women's writers enhanced the concept of literary awareness as they exposed the dilemma of the African because of the re-emergence of religion.

In 2000 to date, African female novelists experienced another dimension to the Women perspective in the ongoing literary debate on contemporary anxieties. The implication is that towards the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the more aggressive and stronger African female writers surfaced. Renowned women writers of the millennium include: Yvonne Vera's The Stone Virgins (2002), Alexandra Fuller's Don't Let Go to the Dogs Tonight (2002), Amma Darko's Faceless (2003), Tess Onwueme's Then She Said It (2003), What Mama Said (2004) and No Vacancy (2005). Others are: Kaine Agary's Yellow- Yellow (2006), Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come (2006), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun (2006), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked (2008), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's The Thing Around Your Neck (2009) and Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry (2009) heralding the end of the decade.

For instance, in the second decade of the new millennium African women writers include: Sophia Obi-Apoko's Broken Pearls (2013), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013), May Ifeoma Nwoye's Oil Cementry (2015)Yetunde Omotoso's The Woman Next Door (2016), Zaynab Alkali's Invisible Borders (2016), Mnguember Vicky Sylvester's The Cabals and the Naked Dance (2019), Zaynab Alkali's Cobwebs and other Short Stories (2019), , Bina Nengi-llagha's A Path of Stone (2021) and Ebidenyefa Tarila-Nikade's 14 Letters To My Lazy Lover (2022). During the period there are obvious thematic formations in African women writings. In fact, it is epoch-making because of the change in the narratives to represent the womn in more acceptable character unlike earlier depictions and to deal with the restrictions of alienation, disillusionment and other unnecessary impediments.

The underlying and fundamental reasons for these issues of gender politics and representations is that in the beginning, formal schooling in Africa was solely offered to the male population, while women were deprived of the privilege. When women were also given the same opportunity, the content of their education reflected their gender.

Notably, women were taught vocational subjects to complement their domestic routines, besides the basic knowledge of reading and writing. On the other hand, men were fully trained to face the challenges of colonialism and postcolonialism. In spite of this, men felt threatened by women's schooling. The implication is that the gender bias concerning access to education stifled women's contributions to the production of literature.

In all of these, critics are of the opinion that African women are incapable of discerning right from wrong but derive western based feminist ideologies. In the words of Bernard Stephen "the Women Question is the centerpiece of the political and literary engagements of feminists worldwide. And the ideology of feminism has its origins in the suffragette-inspired struggles of European and American women" (242). He further argues that "the debates and struggles date back to the nineteenth century, and involved divergent discourses which support or challenge the traditional role of women built around matrimony and paternity" (243). From an unbiased perspective, African women struggle is an age-long issue, which tallies with Ciarunji Chesaina's argument that gender politics and criticism is not a western based phenomenon (213). It shows that African female writers engage in the creative use of the voice to express issues of alienation and disillusionment from the preliterate era. Even then, the women compose songs and dances that mimic societal ills, especially the excessive traditional tenets infringing on the rights of women.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women question imbibes various techniques and principles in the imaginative creativity of some of the finest moments in African women literature. It shows the evolution from concerns of the beginning of the best moments of African women writings and contributions confronting the end to emancipation that shows issues of the female protagonist controversies in the question of choice. The focus spans beyond issues of recurring dilemma of women oppression, discrimination and alienation to identify and address the reasons for gender politics and postcolonial representations. The study showed the role of literature in changing several misconceptions of African women. The study identified the period of the late 1950s as significant in that it marked the beginning of women's movement, feminism and postmodern era because the postmodern era devised the technique of invading and changing the conventional lifestyle to the contemporary model. The revolutionary activities of postcolonialism and feminism is linked to the anxieties of postmodernism and the trio shows the connection of cause and effect trajectory. Women started writing back to change the nation and misrepresentation of women in order to balance the relationship.

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