



## MOTHERHOOD PARADIGM IN AFRICAN FICTION: A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

The present research paper is an attempt to explore the ideology of African men writers to glorify African woman as a pure symbol of the precolonial Africa, a self-sacrificing mother inspiring awe and reverence with her caring aspects of woman's personality. This ideology perpetuates male domination in patriarchal society and asserts that woman could achieve happiness only through marriage and motherhood which implicitly relegates women to become the slaves to men in the name of marriage. This study investigates the glorification of motherhood paradigm in men writings and the ideology of male and female African writers in portrayal of women characters in the selected novels of Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and further references are made to the works of Mariama Ba, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Ama Ata Aidoo and to the works of third generation writers like Semi Ata, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It concludes by highlighting the need for a change in the mindset of the writers to be objective and suggests a liberal approach in gender matters and concludes that feminine passivity could be overcome only through female solidarity among African women by awakening in them a new African consciousness.

**Keywords:** Self-Sacrificing Mother, Motherhood Paradigm, Feminine Passivity, Female Solidarity, Patriarchal Domination, and New African Consciousness.

### 1. Introduction

Modern African fiction deeply concerned with womanhood and motherhood has dramatized various facets of women busily engaged in restructuring the society exposed to the onslaughts of the West. The most important factor with regard to woman in traditional African society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Glorification of Africa and African women has been an important mission of every committed African writer and especially African men writers in colonial and postcolonial eras. However, the ideology perpetuated by patriarchal society that woman could achieve happiness only through marriage and motherhood relegates women to become the slaves to men in the name of marriage. The patriarchal societies uphold the superiority of men over women as women are considered as the vital tools for the continuity of lineage and thus get respect in the society for their ability to recreate. The idea of "mother Africa" often found in male literature is a ploy to silence the woman, which ultimately valorizes the nurturing and caring aspects of woman's personality, but relegates the harsh sufferings of women in real life conditions in contemporary African society. The difference in the ideology of men and women writers implicitly shows the inherent favoring of certain issues notwithstanding the social reality. This study is guided by the objectives: to analyze subjugation, marginalization of women to explore the strategies to be employed to fight patriarchy thereby to reveal the author's vision. Implicitly this paper thus highlights the need for a change in the mindset of writers to be objective and suggests a liberal approach in gender matters.

### 2. Significance of Motherhood in African Society

Motherhood as experienced and practiced in Africa is influenced by religious mythologies and local lore and it is colored with examples of self-sacrifice/giving and much more

in the name of motherhood. While mothers are revered as creators, as providers, cradle rockers, nurturers, and goddesses, they also inspire awe or reverence, because they are known to wedge huge powers in their children's lives. The idea of self-sacrifice emphasizes the centrality of motherhood in African society. The way and manner societies conceptualize motherhood in a way, has come to command popular appeal because it is seen as a symbol of the nation-state. So nationalists these days deploy the nation-as-mother symbolism to mobilize patriotic sentiments. Camara Laye, an African writer from French Guinea; Senghor, a Senegalese poet, politician, express their love for Africa, in terms of the love for mother. David Diop, a Francophone West African poet, glorifies mother in his poems and Okigbo, a Nigerian poet, personifies his mother as a river, in his poetry. The trope is deeply entrenched in the male literary tradition and thus has become one of the prominent subjects in African discourse.

### 3. Misrepresentation of Women in African Writings

The African adage "Mother is Gold" in the realm of African literature is the offshoot of the Mother Africa trope, that pervades the African male literary tradition from colonial to postcolonial literature. Patriarchy is the most important socio-political condition which has influenced the development of female literary tradition to subvert male-biased, and one dimensional representation of women by men writers. As Naaman (2000) suggests "postcolonial discourse often compares patriarchy with colonial power, the imperial gaze with the male objectifying gaze. The colonized nation is thus compared to a woman, not quite an independent subject; the bearer, not maker of her own meaning" (333). The problem with all this, in the words of the critic Irène Assiba D'Almeida (1996) is that when "Africa is compared to a nurturing mother and the African mother is given the proportion of the whole continent, the nuances of actual African women's lives and

experiences are lost" (227). The Mother Africa model magnifies her, but only as an idea, a concept, for it is far removed from the reality of women's daily existence. However, with encoded sexual imperatives, the trope of 'Mother Africa' valorizes nurturing and caring aspects woman's personality and it has become interpretative touchstone for critics, who search for similar aspects in women's writing giving the least significance to the sufferings of women in the roles of wives, which ultimately make them 'faceless and insignificant'. The trope functions both formally and thematically to valorize African culture and gives a positive image of Africa as warm and sensuous, fruitful and nurturing on one hand, but makes the woman an index of the state of the nation on the other.

However, the works that compare woman to "the pot of culture" to quote Omolara Ogundipe- Leslie (1994) are no longer found in recent African writings. But, it is "the private individual destiny" of a female figure that serves as an allegory of the embattled situation of the public...culture and society emerges which shows the faceless postcolonial conditions and the ideology of the writers. Stratton (1994) looks at the "Mother Africa Trope" in the fictional works of African male writers and the subsequent "romanticisation of African womanhood", which according to her masks subordination, and perpetuates the patriarchal socio-political order. Stratton further argues that this trope goes against the interests of African women and should be purposely interrogated to subvert male dominance.

### Male-Female Power Relations

Achebe's magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* (1958) embodies the typical ideals of the woman as the nurturing mother and also describes mother's family as a tireless force whose good is to ensure the continuity of African culture and its people. He illustrates the use of female power by showing the main character, Okonkwo, exiled to his motherland for the misdeed of accidentally killing one of his own tribesmen. The theme "Mother is Supreme" in the novel shows the female as "the mother figure that nurture and save the men from themselves" (*Things Fall Apart*). As Nnaemeka (1994) says, woman as "a mother symbolizes the only refuge for the men from the troubling times". Achebe's mythic concept "Mother is Supreme" in *Things Fall Apart* illustrates his veneration for mother roles, but never goes with "Motherhood paradigm" as given by Amadiume (1997) "The recognition of the motherhood paradigm means that we do not take patriarchy as given or as a paradigm" which is quite contradictory to heroic conception of Okonkwo's character and the potential of man as celebrated by Achebe. Explicitly, Achebe's exemplary efforts to naturalize motherhood carry an implicit male bias, because the concept of mother is supreme signifies that it doesn't shift the focus from man at the center and in control to the primary role of the mother in the economic, social, political and religious institution. The broad-based male bias is equally visible in the great literary critics like Frederick Ivor Case, Abiola Irele's (1975) attack on African women writers:

"It is true that the novels of writers like Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head and Ama Ata Aidoo... touch upon the situation of women in African society, and more lately, Buchi Emecheta has devoted her writing to a lively defense of the cause of the African woman. Not one of these writers, however, displays the

depth of insight of John Munonye in his novel, *The Only Son*, into the situation of the African woman."

Irele's choice of Munonye's *The Only Son* (1966) as a model for the portrayal of the situation of the African woman is revealing of his own view of women. The story of the novel is about colonization and tells of a son's abandonment of his mother, Chiaku, the embodiment of his African heritage, and his acceptance of Western culture. Munonye quite explicitly identifies women with tradition, and portrayed Chiaku in a self-denied role, the epitome of the self-sacrifice, who safeguards the family inheritance following her husband's death expecting her son can continue the lineage and build up the homestead. For all her patience and sacrifice and orthodoxy, the author rewarded her with a marriage to a man of property and masculinity who immediately makes her pregnant. Frederick Ivor Case (1982) appreciated this novel as a significant work with a well-defined symbolic structure and considered *So Long a Letter* as "a novel of limited value, which lacks the well-defined structure".

The so-called "well-defined symbolic structure" according to male critics is exemplified in John Munonye's *The Only Son* (1966) which identifies women with tradition and readily rewards the mother for her self-defined role. However, Nnu Ego and Kehinde of Buchi Emecheta's novels, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Kehinde* are not the epitomes of self-sacrificing motherhood! Nnu Ego who lives for her children and dies without them though becomes the epitome of self-sacrificing mother and the symbol of living tradition of suffering and humiliation in her life-time; but her refusal to answer the prayers for children after her death makes her character unethical according to the dictates of African society, because African society, which is basically patriarchal, values the life of a woman only for her procreative ability.

### Reversing the Dynamics of Patriarchy through Personal Autonomy

African women's writings explore a cultural life for women not choked by traditional customs, but laced with women's struggle for economic empowerment. The case-study of controversial characters like Amaka (*One is Enough*, 1981), Esi (*Changes: A Love Story*, 1991) and Kehinde (*Kehinde*, 1994) highlights this aspect. These characters' individual achievement and self-determination have been critiqued by men as well by women. The protagonists of these novels are not considered to be gold as mother figures by men writers, but they are not faceless because of their individualization and determination to subvert patriarchal domination. The writers of these novels - Emecheta, Nwapa and Aidoo respectively, do not believe in feminism as a new contextual weapon of war against men. However, African womanism, an emerging model of female discourse, is at the heart of their writing and reflects an ideology centered on children and community. It would be unfair to label them as "Women without Men" as interpreted by American feminist critic Katherine Frank in case of Efuru and Amaka (1987). A significant point to keep in mind here is that the African women writers never favor "feminist politics of exclusion" as labeled by Katherine Frank (1987) in their works, but what they depict is the practical realities of women's life in Africa. Their works address simultaneously the need for African women to break the chain of gender of its stigma, and

for both groups to rethink their involvement in an oppressive postcolonial class culture.

### Subverting oppressive Cultural Practices and Traditions

A rigorous feminist approach to African society would reveal a number of excesses in structure and situations which deny women equality. For example, genital mutilation, infertility as well as fertility, the lack of choice for young women, enforced silence, to cite only the most obvious, all contribute to women's oppression and ultimately their facelessness in the family in particular and in society in general.

African women are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming to the extremely imposed requirements of their masculine societies – like the one we find in the character of Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who yearns for liberation and for fulfilment as a woman, while still respecting the traditional concept of manliness. Living in bondage to men, but desiring to live freely and fully, they are bewildered by, or seethe with inner rage at their servitude to a structure of values matched to the needs of others. Some of these women characters like the wives of Okonkwo in *The Bride Price*, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in an attempt to enlarge their lives become active agents and collaborators of patriarchy and abusively treat their co-wives. Some characters resist, but in doing so could not overcome the pull of traditionalism as the character of Akunna (*The Bride Price*), who being educated, could not overcome the superstitious beliefs about paying the bride price, becomes a victim and dies. She becomes a schizophrenic, and her personality fragments by her desire both to accept and to reject her condition. With the exception of the few characters like Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Kehinde in the novel *Kehinde* triumph in their struggle out of patriarchy's shallow grave but they become sacrificial victims, because the ingenuous African society, does not accept them as epitomes of African Womanhood. However the characters like Chiaku in John Munonye's novel *The Only Son* (1966) are hailed for their self-defined role of a mother. Although maternal ideals are entrenched and valorized in all cultures, patriarchal societies present a woman's central purpose to be her reproductive function and so motherhood and mothering become intertwined with issues of a woman's identity.

Though oppression of women is a global phenomenon, could be seen more in third world countries like Africa and among Muslim women in Arab countries. The absorption of cultural norms through socialization processes engender intra-psychic anxieties that usher in women's self-oppression. 'Mother is Supreme' as one of the cultural norms compels woman to sacrifice anything in the name of children, whereas the garb of femininity enmeshes woman's existence in a mire of submissiveness and obedience to man, who stands on the pedestal as "the standard bearer of the norm, the law and the Lagos" (Braidotti). If women try to individualize by self-realization and kicking off treacherous femininity would be de-silenced as unethical and dismissed as witches, and the needs and sensibilities of the women are not considered a priority; or even legitimate.

Women are respected in African society for nothing, but for their ability to procreate. Motherhood thus has been described

in glorious terms as the 'pinnacle of womanhood'. What is at issue, however is not mothering as a physical fact, but the social position and importance given to motherhood, the meaning of mothering. In Mohanty's (1990) words: "That woman as a mother in a variety of societies is not as significant as the value attached to motherhood in these societies. The distinction between the act of mothering and the status attached to it is a very important one – one that needs to be stated and analyzed contextually". The challenge thus is to find out what motherhood in Africa is about. This will reveal the differences between motherhood in Africa and in the West; whereas motherhood has high status in Africa based on the logic of motherhood as observed by Ifi Amadiume (1997), her status is that of a servant in African society as observed by Amadiume, the very thought of women's power being based on the logic of motherhood has proved offensive to many Western feminists. It is easy to see why this is so since in the European system, wifehood and motherhood represented a means of enslavement of women. In the African system of matriarchy, it was women's means of empowerment.

Nevertheless, Emecheta's effort in *The Joys of Motherhood* to represent motherhood in terms of woman's empowering or disempowering has been considered "a radical questioning of the myth of motherhood" (Sougou). But it's not a radical questioning as asserted by Omar Sougou; explicitly it's the reality of woman's life in a male dominated world, a picture of domestic violence depicting struggles of women in man's world where sexuality and motherhood are revealed and accepted as commodities. Implicitly *The Joys of Motherhood* tells the fate of a woman trying to stay loyal to traditional Igbo culture in a rapidly changing Lagos, and Nnu Ego symbolizes a faceless wife and mother, devoting all her life for children and husbands, but dies "with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her".

### New- Found Determination

In an effort to rediscover woman in contemporary African society, the various postmodern African novels like Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Kehinde* (1994), Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1993), *Without a Name* (1994), *Butterfly Burning* (1998), and *Opening Spaces* (1999) and many more; essentially represent numerous elements and new directions in the life of African women. The self-assertive and self-reliant aspect of the woman's role in Africa has only become visible due to the collective efforts of African women writers. Many of the works of African women writers are demonstrative of the various identities women assume in the extended society. The female characters in their works are portrayed as multidimensional agents who no longer remain faceless and marginal to the plot. As d'Almeida (1996) puts it, "literature is a venue through which women portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the periphery. They explore, deplore, subvert and redress the status quo within their fiction."

Women writers not only portray life-like characters to express their views, but the process of writing provides a means to identify themselves and the dignity needed to have a feeling of

fulfillment. In the words of Ann Kithaka (2011), a Kenya poet, “Writing resistance is a process of discovery, emancipation, and reclaiming. It is about reclaiming my dignity, privacy and freedom as an African woman and human being. It is about emancipating myself from historical, structural, and systematic abuse, oppression, and discrimination...It is about discovering my inner strength, my uniqueness, and interdependence on other people.”

Therefore, writing is seen as a space for women to resist all forms of oppression and abuse to which they are the victims and survivors, a space that may not be available in women's day-to-day lives.

Nigerian women writers Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta are the pioneers in presenting the conflict between the individual desire and African traditions or customs leading to untold miseries of women in their novels. Adichie is involved in the creation of discourse meant to push women from the margins to the center as she confronts patriarchy and other forms of marginalization of women in all of her works. By subverting the male order, she successfully achieved a voice for her female characters to challenge the status quo. The characters of Beatrice (Mama of the protagonist) and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* are the case of women asserting their positions in their societies and challenging patriarchy with their several manifestations. Beatrice struggles from the periphery and emerges as the pro-active character that kills patriarchy (by poisoning her husband) and that way moves to the center where she is autonomous to make her own choices. The suffering that Beatrice goes through can only be eased by removing Eugene out of her space and so the writer's act is the final act of tearing down patriarchy and its violence.

In *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie uses the character of Beatrice to encourage women to react to oppression since remaining passive gives the oppressor some impetus to repeat his behavior. Mama, Beatrice a symbol of oppressed African women, suffers such suppressing confinement. She has no voice and does not talk to Papa; she is a dehumanized wife and suffers throughout the novel. Mama unconsciously approves Papa's way of doing things thus presents submissiveness, piety and domesticity equivalent to Okonkwo's wives in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) who stand aside as Okonkwo beats their co-wife Ojiugo. Mama's action also maps to what Maiguru does when Babamukuru assaults Nyasha in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Such behaviour from married women shows how patriarchy compels women to comply with its ideology through the use of violence. Adichie suggests that women should do something to change how society functions through the character of Ifeoma.

#### Attainment of Self-Acceptance

African women's struggle to assert themselves in faceless roles reflects their ability to act upon their choices. However, a significant point to be noted here is that, in most of the African novels by women writers have the female characters that are ready for exhausting obligations of motherhood and are ready to abandon wifehood but not motherhood. Paradoxically African woman is considered a victim when the institution is threatened and she is abandoned or replaced by a second wife. These novels however, offer a utopian vision of something

wished for but still unattainable – the possibility of an expression of sexuality beyond the constraints of social relations feeding into different machineries of control and subordination.

#### 4. Conclusion

The general image that has emerged from African fictional works appears to reflect fairly and accurately, the women's position in some important sectors of social life. The heroines in African fiction seem to encourage African woman that she should dare to dream and have a vision of life. She should aspire to acquire requisite skills for survival and above all, she should aim to be the best at whatever she does. Today, among the important aspects of life that open up all kinds of opportunities, are education and marketable skills. Taking lessons from the stories of female characters, the woman of today should try to advance through education to fight ignorance, poverty, disease, oppression and discrimination. The African woman today should prove different from African stereotype for equality, recognition and comfortable existence on par with men. They should strive to prove not only mother is gold, but wife too has a major role to play in her family, society and ultimately in the progress of the nation. Time has come now to talk about men's relationship to women's demand for gender freedoms, justice, choice, no violence, no harassment, and mobility. This new awakened consciousness is calling men to respond to the feminist demand that men must change. With the pioneering work of profeminists, “a new social awareness, consciousness and awakening has taken birth which is changing the mindset of young minds to reject male superiority and to create new self-definitions that liberate masculinities from patriarchal, homophobic and capitalist power” (Kopano Ratele and Mbuyiselo Botha, 2014) and thus this new awakening aims to bring justice to all women and men striving to redefine masculinity, acknowledging how traditional gender roles have been detrimental to women and men.

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