

The Dea(R)Th Of Female Presence In Early African Literature: The Depth Of Writers' Responsibility

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Introduction:

There is a sharp contrast between the African first novels set in the past and largely written by men, and contemporary ones, some of which have been authored by women. This contrast has to do with the delineation of women in the novels. A relatively short while ago the popular notion of Africa as an arid farmland with respect to literary production was sustained by many who truly believed that Africa had contributed nothing of value to world literature. But by the 1980s works by African authors had begun to generate a great deal of interest. By its sheer authenticity, African literature could no longer be ignored, and so, finally, its contribution to world literature received full recognition and acceptance. So the 1980s would go down in history as the decade during which African literature flourished.

Some of the prominent names around which early African literature revolved were Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Leopold Senghor, and Sembène Ousmane. These authors invariably became favorites of Western academic discourse on modern literature, and prestigious literary magazines and journals enthusiastically sought interviews from them as well as carried reviews of their latest books. Such international visibility and respectability brought rich rewards: prestigious professorships, honorary degrees, and even the Nobel Prize for Literature. Not only are these authors at home in their cultural milieu, their works provoke immediate aesthetic response for they deal honestly and effectively with things that matter in Africa. But in spite of the critical success enjoyed by these authors, all male, the dearth of a strong female presence is apparent in their works and presents an unbalanced picture of African rural life, ignoring the important roles that women have played and continue to play in African society. As a result, feminist critics have denounced the patriarchal bent in these novels, citing that women have been cast in marginal roles and depicted as mere objects of sexual gratification, procreation and idle gossips.

Feminists' Reactions to the Male-Authored First Novels:

The dearth of female presence in the early novels has been taken up by feminist critics for the obvious disparity in the delineation of male-female relations. Helen Chukwuma, an acclaimed feminist critic and advocate for African women's causes, comments that "The female character in African fiction is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she was not part of decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when

the decisions affected her directly” (219). Chinua Achebe, the best known and best read African author, who has been acclaimed for having restored a sense of pride to Africa through his novels has been at the center of this criticism for, critics contend, creating “back-house, timid, subservient, lack-luster” female characters, particularly in his historical novels—*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (Chukwuma 2). This lop-sided depiction of male-female relations has prompted feminist critics such as Helen Chukwuma, Merun Nasser, Rose Acholonu, Theodora Ezeigbo, Rose Mezu, Mabel Segun, Florence Stratton, Andrea Powell, and many others, to lend voice to this patriarchal delineation of women in the African first novels. They question the consistent pattern in these novels in which women have been portrayed as voiceless and in which the actions solely revolve around the male.

It is against this background that the epochal explosion of African female writers onto the world stage has been received with much excitement because they have dared to challenge the status quo of male domination by redirecting the course of the female character in the African novel. This new breed of women writers are determined to entrench feministic sensibilities in the African novel by casting the African female character in a new light and in ways hitherto unknown. About this new type of writing Chukwuma writes:

Feministic writing in Africa today shows the difficult haranguing process of female self-actualisation. The affirmation “I am” presupposes that the subject knows what she is. The whole rubric of feministic literature traces the process of this self-knowledge and selfhood. This cause is by its nature and goal revolutionary and different and in most cases radical. The cause cuts across the socio-cultural norm and in the process sets aside the old ways so as to carve out the new, and must so succeed in the new way that it will attract to itself acclaim, recognition and acceptance. (xv)

Feministic writing is a welcome diversion from the status quo, its objective being to reclaim women’s rights and positions in society. Until the debut of feministic writing in African literature, male characters dominated all spheres of achievement in the African novel. Some of the pioneers of feministic writing are: Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal el Saadawi, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ifeoma Okoye, Mabel Segun, Zaynab Alkali, and so on. Rose Acholonu notes that “These pathfinders ... were empowered by liberal education and the acquisition of literary skills ... to break the seals of silence and invisibility on the female protagonist by the early traditionalist male writers” (133). Chukwuma refers to the writers as the “New home-grown intelligentsia, educated, erudite and probing, fired with the zeal of having a voice and being heard” (vii). Their efforts to present brand-new, assertive and individualistic females have helped to salvage the lop-sided image that male writers have created. In appreciation of the female writers’ efforts Rose Mezu reminds African women of the need to show gratitude and reverence to all those parents and mentors who have taken it upon themselves to educate women, adding that “It is only through such enlightenment that African women writers have been able to dismantle the myth of female irrelevance by challenging such archetypal roles as witches, faithless women, femmes fatales, viragos, and playthings of capricious gods” (6).

Following the excitement brought about by female writers with respect to the woman's condition, Chukwuma again intones: "The rural, back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced by her modern counterpart, a full-rounded human being, rational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own" (2). This paper therefore seeks to show how African women writers have changed the status quo of male domination in the African novel by empowering women in ways they have never imagined and how they can continue the task of empowerment through literature. This can be achieved by casting the female character not as subdued and voiceless but as positively assertive, resilient and resourceful, and encouraging women to resist any form of literature that encourages them to accept their subordination.

Feministic Writing and Women's Empowerment:

African women's writing has opened up a whole new world of opportunities and awareness for women and the society at large. More than ever before, women have become more conscious of the value of a good education and of the need to resist all forms of subsumation, denial and marginalization. Flora Nwapa, Africa's first published female novelist, opened a new chapter in African literature by making women the central characters in her novels. In *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is Enough*, for example, Nwapa depicts women who are accomplished, well behaved and relatively wealthy. But as accomplished as these heroines are they all have troubled marriages due to problems arising from infertility. With the exception of Amaka in *One is Enough*, the female protagonists in *Efuru* and *Idu* are illiterate and glued to tradition, the very tradition that ultimately brings them down.

In *One is Enough*, Amaka is an educated school teacher whose survival instincts propel her to jettison tradition. After six years of a childless marriage Amaka decides she has had enough when her mother-in-law informs her that another woman and her children, fathered by Amaka's husband, will move into her home. This latest humiliation proves too much for Amaka and she moves out of her matrimonial home and to the city of Lagos. In this city, in an effort to achieve individualism and fulfillment, Amaka ironically achieves motherhood, self-actualization and great wealth.

In her novels Nwapa deals with infertility in marriage as does Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Both Nwapa and Emecheta depict their society's reaction to the problem of infertility and how women are affected by it. In *Efuru* Nwapa informs the reader that childlessness is both a curse and a failure on the woman's part (165), and in *The Joys of Motherhood* when Nnu Ego fails to conceive a child, her husband marries another wife who becomes pregnant right away. This development heightens Nnu Ego's self-doubt, reinforcing her belief that she has failed as a woman and causing her to sink into despair. So we see two kinds of heroines operative here: the illiterate and the literate. Judging from the case of Amaka in *One is Enough*, need anyone be reminded that education bestows not only confidence but provides

better opportunities, and for women it opens doors of opportunity for them to pursue their individual empowerment.

Education has remained the most effective tool for African women's empowerment and has sustained and helped them to rise to the occasion in moments of crises. It has made women aware of the many choices available to them and to know that they should not just sit and wallow in self-pity but that they should "think, plan, execute and concretize" (Chukwuma 4). An excellent example of this strategizing is found in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* where instead of arguing with her parents-in-law, Adah tactfully decides to "be as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove" (4) in order to bring to fruition her dream of joining her husband in England, a strategy that works out just right.

In *One is Enough* Amaka opts to walk away from her husband who prefers an illiterate woman to a loving, hardworking and prosperous wife, and then refuses to marry the man who eventually fathers her twin sons. Her self-confidence and financial independence combine to embolden her and strengthen her decision to channel her energies to her contract business and to raise her twin sons all by herself. Nwapa uses Amaka to highlight the importance of women's economic independence, with the implication that education, hard work and determination ultimately open doors for women. This point is articulated further by Nwapa in *Women Are Different* where the character Chinwe divorces her husband without asking for or expecting any form of support from him:

Chinwe has done the right thing. Her generation was doing better than her mother's own. Her generation was telling the men that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They are saying that women have options. Their lives cannot be ruined because of a bad marriage. They have a choice, a choice to set up a business of their own, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry or divorce their husbands. Marriage is not the only way. (118-119)

In *So Long a Letter* Mariama Bâ presents Aissatou, the mother of four sons, expressing her disappointment at her husband's decision to marry another wife after years of a happy marriage. Aissatou is faced with a dilemma: to remain with Mawdo Bâ and to accept all the ramifications attendant on that decision, or to leave him. Aissatou, unwavering in her decision, stoically walks away from a compromised marriage, taking only her dignity and self-esteem and, of course, her four sons. One of the reasons she is advised against leaving her husband is that sons need their father, but she pays no heed to that and leaves anyway (30-32). In the end, contrary to popular assumption, she recovers from her betrayal, relocates to North America with her sons, and from all indications, finds fulfillment and settles to a dream job. Here we are presented with a courageous woman whose determination and sense of purpose propel her to control her destiny.

By this singular act, Aissatou confronts and dismantles the shackles of subjugation and sets herself free, unlike her friend Ramatoulaye, who passively broods over her husband's betrayal

and eventual death. Certainly Bâ supports the idea that a woman should not remain in a marriage under stifling circumstances, absorbing humiliation after humiliation, until she is completely destroyed. She affirms that “Marriage is no chain. It is a mutual agreement over a life’s programme (sic). So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain...? The wife can take the initiative to make the break” (74). In effect Bâ wants the reader to know that “There is nothing wrong if a woman wears trousers, goes to the cinema alone or keeps male friends. She also suggests, through Daouda Dieng, a male character, that a promising way out for women is for them to take a keener interest in the destiny of their countries” (Orabueze 117).

Although it is to the African female writers’ credit that the incorrect depiction of the woman has begun to be reversed, some male writers later joined in the effort by focusing their attention on women and elevating them as central characters in their novels. Some of those who have focused on elevating women are Chinua Achebe, Ousmane Sembène, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, Isidore Okpewho, Chuks Iloegbunam, and so on. Achebe achieves this in *Anthills of the Savannah* about which Mezu admits that “In Beatrice, Achebe now strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women...” (5). Segun contends that in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* and Sembène’s *God’s Bits of Wood* the two writers “have demonstrated that the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct,” and urges the female writer to “deconstruct gender and the social paradigms that support it” (301). She goes further to mention that the deconstruction should not be limited to adult literature alone but should extend to even juvenilia. In more recent times, one of the most exciting examples of the evolution of the African female character is portrayed in Chuks Iloegbunam’s 2004 novel *Surbenia’s Day*. This novel is all the more exciting because Iloegbunam is not female, but male.

In this novel the female protagonist, Ilinna Nwamama, a Brigadier General and Commander of the all-female commando brigade, is given charge of ground operations during a coup d’etat which topples a ruthless dictator and restores equilibrium to a new social order. The military women are portrayed as resilient and with boundless capabilities. In *Surbenia’s Day* Iloegbunam’s clarity of vision exposes the future in a clear and truthful exposition of the present and reminds us all of the untapped energy and potential of African women. The reader is left to wonder whether the events of this novel are a prediction of the future of African nation states. In the face of unrelenting turmoil, corruption and fratricidal wars, are African women being projected as the future leaders who will salvage Africa from the throes of death?

Writers’ Responsibility in African Women’s Empowerment:

So much still remains to be done with respect to the situation of the woman in Africa. Women are marginalized the world over but Africa and the rest of the Third World top the list, their societies being largely patriarchal. Patriarchy bestows absolute power on the male and through their customs and traditions which are tailored to favor men patriarchal societies subjugate

women. Merun Nasser has a suspicion that something is not quite right there because “The traditional role of the African woman has always been a complementary role and evidence of that fact has been widely supplied by social scientists” (21). She notes that African male novelists have failed to depict that complementary role of the African woman in society and, as a result, readers have “come away with the impression that the role of the African woman is barely above that of ‘chattel’” (22).

Rose Acholonu advances this argument further by stating that:

In *Things Fall Apart*, we see Okonkwo playing his role as the traditional head of the family. He is a typical tyrant. He rules and directs his wives in the manner of a cattle herdsman. He roars like “the thunder” and administers physical blows to his wives at the slightest provocation. The wives live in awe of him. Achebe, true to tradition and the precepts of Igbo custom, seems to condone this inhuman treatment of Okonkwo’s wives.” (39)

Rose Mezu lends voice to the deplorable condition of African women with these words: “For centuries, African women languished on the fringe of their universe—neglected, exploited, degenerated, and indeed made to feel like outsiders. They were not invited to stay when men were engaged in any discussions; they were not included in councils of war; they did not form part of the masquerades representing the judiciary and ancestral spirits” (2). In the same vein, Florence Stratton maintains that “*Things Fall Apart* legitimizes this process whereby women were excluded from post-colonial politics and public affairs through its representation of pre-colonial Igbo society as governed entirely by men” (27). Commenting further on the glaring gender disparity in the early novels Andrea Powell states that:

The apparent dismissal of women’s issues in Achebe’s early novels suggests a “first things first” approach to nationalism, an approach which dictates that Africans deal with national problems before they move on to “less important issues,” such as gender politics on local levels. We know, however, despite the immediate attractions of the “first things first” movement, that gender issues are indeed integral to nationalist causes. Certainly, in order for African nationalism to serve all Africans, women’s issues must make their way into public discourse and, ultimately, women must take part in the actual formation of African nations. (167)

Continuing, Nasser opines that Achebe’s novels have “no room for the woman who does not conform to the role he has chosen for her. It is this state of benign neglect of an important aspect of the woman ... which forces the following conclusion: Chinua Achebe has not presented a realistic portfolio of the woman, both in the traditional and modern settings in African society” (28). In her turn, Chukwuma contends that African “indigenous cultures had more regard for women in terms of the role they played” but notes that culture has essentially served the purpose of men especially during the colonial period:

Colonialism built its systems on men which economically empowered the men and had the contrary effect on women. The men by acquiring education and

white-collar jobs abandoned the women to the circumscribed domains of home and farm. Women's dependency on men increased [and] so were their passivity, voicelessness and marginalization. (16)

She maintains that despite the tremendous benefit of colonialism and self-governance, colonialism "completely eroded all forms of women partnership and women had to trail behind not as partners in progress but as second-class citizens made content only by the crumbs from the Masters' table" (38).

So far there appears to be a consensus in the denunciation of the condition of African women in literature. All interested parties seem to agree that the best way to fix this apparent anomaly is through education and a new socialization. One of the ways through which the lot of women can begin to change is through the instrumentality of literature for "the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done (Achebe 4). It is common knowledge that art not only reflects society but is equally influenced by it. The beauty of literature lies in its dissemination and enjoyment and, as Chukwuma contends, "what is pleasurable to the reader must also be relevant and informative" (52).

It may be argued that in the early years of the development of African literature male writers dominated the scene and so their literature projected only their perspective. But as much as we may argue about this we must admit that that was where we were at that point in time. It is true that at that time there were not as many women of note; even then, some are of the contention that "In every age and time there had been women who exhibited economic sense and resource management within and outside their homes even in the rural environment" (Chukwuma 16). Certainly, in times past, there existed women of prominence and power who wielded extraordinary influence on their households and communities, women whose lives would serve as sources of inspiration, but no effort has been made to record their lives and influence for posterity. In the southeastern part of Nigeria, for example, many deities and towns have been identified as having been named after women, but little or no research has been conducted to that effect and much of that may have been lost.

Creative writers are, therefore, being urged to research into the lives of these extraordinary women in history and model women characters on them as models of African womanhood. Their stories will inspire women and give them hope. Mabel Segun urges women writers to strive to incorporate all aspects of women's achievements in their writing, affirming that:

There have been women activists such as those in the celebrated Aba Women's riots of 1937, who faced colonial guns to protest against what they considered an injustice—the erosion of their traditional powers in the township councils, although the immediate cause of the riots was a rumour [sic] about taxation. There was also Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's grassroots mobilization of Egba women in Abeokuta against perceived victimization by a despotic ruler whom they succeeded in driving into exile. But the impression given in our literature is that such women have never existed in our society. (298)

Because of the strong feelings elicited by the condition of African women and the unflattering depiction of women in those early African novels written by men, the most prominent of whom is Achebe, much of the vilification and queries about the whys and wherefores are directed at him. In an interview granted by Achebe to Anna Rutherford in London in 1987, the year that Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* was nominated for the Booker Prize, Rutherford pointedly asks Achebe: "Could we look at what you see the role of women to be in the new African state?" Achebe's reply:

First of all let me say that, looking at the past and present, I think that we have been ambivalent, we have been deceitful even, about the role of the woman. We have sometimes said 'The woman is supreme—mother is supreme,' we have said all kinds of grandiloquent things about womanhood, but in our practical life the place of the woman has not been adequate. At the same time I'm not saying 'This is how it is going to be from now on' because I am aware of my own limitations. In mapping out in detail what woman's role is going to be, I am aware that radical new thinking is required. The quality of compassion and humaneness which the woman brings to the world generally has not been given enough scope up till now to influence the way the world is run. We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the woman, and what the group around Beatrice [in *Anthills*] is saying is that the time has now come to put an end to that. I'm saying the woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her role is going to be, with the humble cooperation of men. The position of Beatrice as sensitive leader of that group is indicative of what I see as necessary in the transition to the kind of society which I think we should be aiming to create.

Achebe's words in this interview echo what feminist critics have been emphasizing all along, that is, that women must champion their own cause for greater effectiveness. Much later, in a 2008 interview granted by Achebe to Okey Ndibe and Joyce Abunaw for the Association of Nigerian Authors to mark the golden jubilee of *Things Fall Apart*, Ndibe pointedly tells Achebe that he (Achebe) has been accused by some critics of harboring an unflattering view of women in his novels and asks him how he sees the place of women within the society he depicts. Achebe's response:

There is a misreading of my fiction in that complaint. I think many people think that what I'm doing is praising the position of women. It's not; in fact, it's the very opposite. What I was doing was pointing out how unjust the Igbo society is to women. And how better to explore it than to make the hero of this story, Okonkwo... all his problems are problems that have to do with the feminine. There is nothing wrong with Okonkwo except his failure to understand that the gentleness, the compassion that we associate with women is even more important than strength. Now, people don't understand why I am showing these women who are not in charge. I'm showing them that way because that's how it is in this society I want to change. And that's what Okonkwo was not able to learn, and I want others after him to learn it: that women, compassion, music... these things are valuable, more valuable than war and violence.

Coming from Achebe the above viewpoint is significant since he has borne the brunt of feminists' chastisements for his depiction of women in his historical novels. To this end, we could use the wisdom of Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century African American anti-slavery legend, who in a convention stated: "I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right up again" (Gates and McKay 247). By the same token, if Achebe by his position as the most prominent African writer seemed to have started an unpopular trend in his depiction of women, he has now turned full circle and is championing the cause of women. Let us hope that Achebe, the trend setter, again draws multitudes of followers.

Conclusion

In spite of the acclaim won by African female authors for presenting a more balanced portrait of the female character, so much still remains to be done by way of creating awareness and continuing to work toward the empowerment of all women. Segun maintains that "Women must have a strong voice in civil society, considering that they form more than half the population. Women's organizations should act as pressure groups to end male domination, not only of the cultural and social spheres of life but also of the political arena" (296). She maintains that as things stand the scope of African feministic writing is severely limited:

Female writers confine their writings almost exclusively to the domestic scene, thus giving the impression that patriarchal society is justified in excluding women from the public arena. Their themes centre mostly on love, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, marital infidelity and rape. There is thus the paradox of woman who claims equality with man but does not venture into the male preserve: politics. (298)

Feminist writers must tackle the systems that oppress and subjugate women. This is a way of helping women "unlearn the lessons of the past, engendering in them a new dynamism borne of their new awareness of their inherent strengths and potentialities for effecting change in their society as equal partners with men" (Segun 300).

Judging from the way that the tide is turning it has become urgent that the woman's story be told, and feministic scholars believe that that story should best flow from the pen of a woman. Female writers should be prepared to play dual roles in society as writers and as women. Admittedly, the task ahead for women writers is far from easy, considering that the female voice is very much in its infancy in African literature, but women "have an additional commitment to employ their art to place women at the centre [sic] of development and change. Theirs should be the sort of empowerment that reveals to women their potentialities, for so long suppressed by male domination" (Segun 297). Since women are in a better position to motivate fellow women, the challenge to writers, and to women writers especially, is to:

Research into their herstories [sic] and tell about women's lives and accomplishments; tell about the battered voiceless wife, also tell about the women of means who ruled their households; tell about the merchant queens, the omus, the Iyalodes, the Magiras, tell about the priestesses of deities, yes, tell about women because indeed there are some herstorical [sic] precedents whose stories will give hope to women. Go tell about them. (Chukwuma 17)

Currently, women have made significant contributions to African society and have proved beyond doubt that, given the opportunity, they have the tenacity to excel in all of their endeavors. Mezu chronicles some of the achievements of contemporary African women and intones:

African women are making meaningful contributions as lecturers, professors, and presidents of universities; as commissioners and ministers, senators and governors, and chairpersons of political parties; as directors and others involved in literary movements and campaigns against forced marriages, clitoridectomies, and obsolete widowhood practices. African women can outstrip their fictive counterparts to be partners with men in national progress and development and to gain individual self-realization and fulfillment. (7)

The success of these women is rooted in "their strong commitment to the general cause, their loyalty, selfless service, natural incorruptibility, their steadfastness and resilience" (Chukuma 50). It is therefore imperative that all educated women in positions of authority join forces in uplifting fellow women, for women possess a natural ability for nurturing and getting things done.

It is important to reiterate further that education is indispensable in women's causes and invariably gives them the confidence they need to look inward and begin to shake off the many years of cultural and religious indoctrination and realize their complementary role and indispensability to the male. Feministic writing inspires and motivates them to do just that:

The success of feminism in the African context derives from the discovered awareness by women of their indispensability to the male. This is the bedrock of her actions. This gives her the anchor and the voice. Thus the myth of male superiority disappears, for the woman looks inward for a fresh appreciation of self. (Chukwuma 229)

Finally, it is fitting to conclude with these words by Elaine Showalter as cited by Chukwuma: "In women's hands—in women writers' hands—lies the regeneration of the world. Let us go with our tongues of fire consecrated to an entirely holy work, cleansing, repairing, beautifying as we go, the page of the world's history which lies before us now" (19).

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