

MIGRATION, HETEROSEXUALITY AND IMAGES OF DEVALUED WOMANHOOD IN SELECTED WORKS OF ADICHIE, AGARY AND BAINGANA

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ABSTRACT

The artistic presentation of women in contemporary literary texts by female writers calls for urgent rethinking. The reason is that contemporary African works of fiction, written by women, are continuously replete with images of devalued womanhood and female sexual mercantilism which have increasingly encouraged the break-down of universal laws of moral conduct. This study examines the portrayal of women as migratory beings with lascivious thoughts and promiscuous intentions in Adichie's *Americanah*, Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Baingana's *Tropical Fish*. The study reveals how women's ways are darkly garbed in immorality and their words are tainted with streams of profanities. Therefore, the feminist and sociological approaches are adopted in this study because they relate literature to a larger discourse of women and the society and see literature as an instrument with which to transform society. The conclusion of this study is that the endorsement given by contemporary feminist writers to heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, especially in the selected texts under analysis, is an anathema to traditional cultures and justifies deviant sexual behaviours in a world where sex is trivialized and is no longer treated as sacrosanct.

Keywords: *Migration, Heterosexuality, Devalued Womanhood, Sexual Mercantilism, Contemporary African Literature, Feminism.*

INTRODUCTION

One can hardly carry out any discussion on women without recourse to feminism which focuses on, examines female experience and tackles gender inequality. Feminist themes which are explored in contemporary literary texts written by women include sexual objectification, female oppression or stereotyping and discrimination among others. Sociological theory, on the other hand, places literature in its socio-milieu and enables the reader to understand socio-political happenings (or realities) which are reflected in works of art.

Migration, in itself, is not new in the history of the human race. It is a natural phenomenon and a common happening. Therefore, the free and unrestrained movement of people from one place to another is usually not a problem. People migrate for a variety of reasons of which one is to find greener pastures or to have freedom. What is however, documented in contemporary African literary texts, especially the ones written by Adichie, Agary and Baingana, is the alarming rate at which the young women who migrate abroad tend to dabble into 'degrading and dehumanizing acts of sexual mercantilism (Azuike 31-2), of their own volition and without self control. The theme of migration or sexual merchandising is most exemplified in selected works of Adichie, Agary and Baingana. The novels to be examined are: *Americanah*, *Yellow-Yellow* and *Tropical Fish*, respectively.

This study focuses on how women's ways are darkly garbed in immorality in their migratory missions abroad; making them acquire foreign values and habits which are most condescending and indecent and which turn them into objects of derision and abuse.

Literature is reflective of the environment of its creation. Therefore, writers of contemporary works of fiction must begin to correct the maligned characters and images of women in African literature for their works to be taken seriously. Female writers should use their creativity to engender a re-definition of the role and place of women in African literature. The function of literature as a reformist tool cannot be over emphasised. Therefore, female writers should portray their female characters in positive light (Azuike 49). They should, furthermore, desist from constantly painting perverted images of women, especially women who use their sexuality for mercantile reasons or for gaining favours from men.

EFFECTS OF MIGRATION ON WOMEN

In the texts under study, women find themselves caught up in the labyrinth of foreign cultures which leave their bodies scarred for life (Gohar 47). No matter where they migrate to, the women in the selected texts by Adichie, Agary and Baingana still find that they are 'chauvinistically located in men's world (Owoeye 65)' and this discovery tends to have very 'retarding implications and dire consequences on the goals set by them (Owoeye 65). Ifemelu in *Americanah*, Zilayefa in *Yellow-Yellow* and Christine in *Tropical Fish*, tend to perceive migration as the only means of leading better lives, especially abroad.

Though the writers of the aforementioned texts under review have 'continued the literary tradition of showing feminist concern for women's issues and have equally demonstrated a commitment to exposing the challenges that women face in the changing world (Okolocha 70),' their female characters sadly find themselves in a quagmire where they lose out on all counts and become more marginalized and more devalued than they were in their homeland. Migration leads to a revolution of values in Adichie, Agary and Baingana. According to Conde:

Ethical values have fallen into relativism...universal laws of conduct have been broken and people find it difficult to distinguish between good and evil. The perversion of laws has set human law against natural law and is clearly shown by the legalization of abortion...and same sex unions (82).

Migration causes a loss of identity for the women in the contemporary literary texts under study. Ifemelu, Zilayefa and Christne in *Americanah*, *Yellow-Yellow* and *Tropical Fish*, respectively, find that they are exposed to various levels of sexual abuse; making them instruments for sexually satisfying the men. They also quickly realise that their relationships only last for as long as the sexual pleasures which they give to men do. As a consequence, the brutalization and sexual abuse of women are made legitimate in foreign lands as the aforementioned texts reveal. In the selected texts also, young women are used and then dumped by their abusers. They are treated as sex slaves for the suppression of the sexual urges in the men that they have dealings with. According to Gohar (45):

Black people in Africa and the USA share a history of suffering and an ancestral memory of agony and pain reflected in their literatures. The complexities and intensities of the history of race relations and colonisation in Africa and Black America...gave rise to a literature of protest.

The above cited opinion is evident in Adichie's *Americanah*, a protest literature published in 2013. Ifemelu's experiences in America, for instance, tend to intensify her identity crisis. Adichie has, herself, witnessed racism, oppression and daily humiliation of black people by white racists in America. This has given rise to the protest literature she has written. Therefore, her protagonist's insistence in *Americanah*, on her identity as a black woman with kinky hair amidst racial discrimination and segregation is highly commendable. Unlike Zilayefa and Christine in *Yellow-Yellow* and *Tropical Fish*, respectively, Adichie's Ifemelu is bold enough to express her repulsion and disgust at the discrimination and oppression around her. Later in *Americanah*, Ifemelu insists on returning home to Africa as a way of re-establishing links with her roots. Christine does the same in Baingana's *Tropical Fish* as well. The decision taken by the young women to return home to their roots in Africa is informed by the realization that migrating to the USA has robbed them of their dreams of making it big in 'greener pastures' and has caused them to face an intense identity crisis.

Migration is a new social order for women in the selected texts under study. Women in Adichie, Agary and Baingana are keen to join numerous others in their search for the 'golden goose' in foreign lands. Migration to a foreign land is also

considered by Ifemelu, Zilayefa and Christine as a 'divine escape' from the troubles and predicaments that they face at home. Migration is however, soon discovered by them to legitimize female degradation in foreign lands. Adichie and Baingana have joined the writers of contemporary African fiction who have empowered their protagonists and caused them to speak out against their oppression and their lewd experiences of sexual abuse in the Diaspora.

The words spoken by the female characters in the selected texts are tainted with streams of profanities and lots of vulgarities. Adichie and Baingana, especially, let us into a culture shock and hold nothing back in their portrayal or criticism of the American and European cultures which seem to be at loggerheads with African culture, exemplified by their protagonists. It is not surprising that social realist writers like Adichie, Agary and Baingana are graphic in their use of language. They deliberately use words that succinctly describe, even if offensive to the ears, what they intend to say to their reading public. As a result, the readers find the diction in selected texts as being replete with words and expressions that are considered vulgar and scatological in nature. There are vulgar words like 'fuck,' 'screw,' 'vagina,' 'dick,' 'penis,' and many more used in selected texts to describe sexual intercourse and relationships. Baingana says rather graphically in *Tropical Fish* (81) that: 'skin doesn't wear out, not vaginas, not penises. Have a good wash and you're ready for the next lay.' Baingana dabbles into scatological or electroconvulsive use of words like Adichie to best capture the experiences of her protagonist in her migratory mission abroad. Quite early in life, young Christine in *Tropical Fish* is exposed to hearing her father utter streams of profanities

by way of communication. And when she migrates to America, everywhere she turns, vulgarities are spoken. In the following excerpt, Christine is seven years old. She is both repelled and fascinated by the words spoken to her mother by her father. His continuous use of the word 'fuck' makes Christine to react by telling us that:

I didn't know what fuck meant, but the sound of it, the frothy "fff," the relish he added to the "uck" as he said it again, cutting it up, made it dangerous and evil, yet desirable, powerful, eatable, a magical chant against sainthood, guilt, against daylight itself. Ffuucck. The word hypnotized. It spelled out the need to shock, to be free (23).

The early exposure to obscenities and use of vulgar words tends to complicate Christine's sexual relationships, especially in the Diaspora. Adichie also infuses the shock value mentioned by Christine in the excerpt above into her work in order to cause disgust in her readers. Adichie particularly exposes the sexual immorality that occupies the minds and taints the actions of the younger generation in *Americanah*. This is emphasized in her highly descriptive, highly humorous, satiric but scatological use of language. Let us consider the following excerpt from her text where Obinze's cousin tells a female character: 'ahn-ahn! Do you know we used to fuck in public? We did it at the Arts Theatre....' Another character, Shan, speaks openly about sexual affairs in racist America as follows:

In Europe the white men are thinking "I just want a hot woman." In America the white men are thinking "I won't touch a black woman but I could maybe do Halle Berry (320)."

America is a society where, according to Adichie, 'people thought the expression "making love" is a little maudlin and "having sex" feels truer and the use of the word "fucking" is more arousing (447). This is rather culturally shocking! Agary's use of vulgar language is rather mild compared to those of Adichie and Baingana. However one thing is glaring in all three writers and this is that they represent the growing number of contemporary African female writers who deviate from the mild use of language in addressing social ills to dabbling into the use of electroconvulsive words, which many readers may consider as repulsive.

HETEROSEXUALITY AND THE FEMINIST AGENDA

Heterosexuality is defined here as a sexual orientation whereby one is attracted to members of the opposite sex. And bisexuality refers to the attraction to members of either sex. Homosexuality in turn, is an attraction to members of the same sex (Tunde & Olowolagba 174-5). Apart from heterosexuality, bisexuality and homosexuality are said by Tunde and Olowolagba (170) to have been triggered off by the rise of feminist militarism 'as a protest for socio-political and economic justice for women.' The aforementioned sexual orientations later gave way to an unbridled quest for sexual autonomy, defined as the freedom to make a sexual choice by an individual.

Sexual autonomy is further explained as 'sexual independence (Azuike 21)' of which feminists have understood as the right of the individual to decide the 'where, with whom, when and how' sexual intimacy can occur (Azuike 22). The practice of sexual autonomy in Adichie, Agary and Baingana has lead to the series of unhealthy, sexual relationships that exist

between the male and female characters that the writers depict in their works. In all three authors, sexual autonomy condones waywardness, promiscuity and sexual orgies. Ifemelu, Zilayefa and Christine in *Americanah*, *Yellow-Yellow* and *Tropical Fish*, respectively, tend to flagrantly display their disregard for the feelings of the men they sleep with by serially jumping from one man's bed to another in the name of sexual freedom (Azuike 22).

Heterosexuality encourages sexual immorality in Adichie, Agary and Baingana, though it is the least contentious of the three sexual orientations earlier mentioned. Heterosexuality is the most common sexual orientation known to mankind. However, it should not be seen as 'normal' in a situation whereby young women 'bed-hop' with careless abandon like they do in the literary texts under review. The sexual orientation continuum is a term used to describe 'human sexuality that places sexual orientation on a continuous spectrum from heterosexuality to homosexuality.' A person who is heterosexual is referred to as being 'straight', rather than 'gay'. Therefore, the assumption is that homosexuality or gayness is immoral whereas heterosexuality is moral especially in African culture.

However, women in Adichie, Agary and Baingana have thrown all caution to the wind in their display of sexual behaviours that are repulsive and anti-African in culture. While each of the women in the texts is romantically attached to one man, each of them also engages in multifarious sexual escapades with other men till unwanted pregnancies and abortions result from their promiscuity. In Baingana, for instance, evidence is seen of young girls who engage in long hours of group sex with

men until 'a slow death is born (76), according to the author. The girls are not remorseful until Rosa, one of them, realises she is going to die from the dreaded disease of HIV and AIDS. Only then, do we hear her lamenting as follows:

'I am going to die soon. I'm dying because...we overdid it, trying to pass the point of need, to exhaust desire (76).'

Later in *Tropical Fish*, same girl confesses to others that: 'the neighbour's son shouldn't have put his finger up into me when I was ten (76).' And when she contracts the deadly disease, she laments thus: 'skin that was praised for its smooth brown softness is now patterned with scattered rash, sores that won't heal, yellow pus, itching that is no longer pleasurable to scratch (77).

Baingana graphically captures the young woman's frustrations in the description she gives of Rosa's final days: Lungs sound harsh and shake...with dry coughs...organs, still so young, fail ...one after another...the liver failure, kidney failure, mysterious tumours, and of course, always, the streamy splatter of diarrhoea...the anus will never again feel the pleasure of firm faeces slowly moving out (77).

The above would have been avoidable if the young women in question had abstained from sexual immorality and had faced their studies. Group orgy, lesbianism, same-sex marriage and homosexuality are particularly considered an anathema to African custom (Azuike 36). That is why the young women's series of uncontrolled sexual escapades are captured by Baingana in *Tropical Fish* as sickening and utterly condemnable (Azuike: 34).'

In Adichie's *Americanah*, Ifemelu, the female protagonist also engages in a series of sexual affairs with numerous men. Her sexual romps with the opposite sex; especially with Obinze, a married man, tend to cast her in ugly light. She causes the end of Obinze's marriage to Kosi by sleeping regularly with him. Adichie captures the illicit love affair between Obinze and Ifemelu in the following manner:

It surprised her [Ifemelu] , that he [Obinze] took her out openly, to lunch and to dinner, to his private club where the waiter called her "madam", perhaps assuming she was his wife; that he stayed with her until past midnight and never showered after they made love; that he went home wearing her touch and her smell on his skin (450).

In Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*, Zilayefa is presented as a very promiscuous young woman who defies her mother's injunctions by engaging in a sexual affair with Admiral, a sixty year old man, who makes her pregnant out of wedlock. She indulges in the illicit affair with him on the pretext that she 'hopes the relationship would give her a taste of close paternal affection (138)' that she never had. When it becomes obvious to her that the divorced and fun loving play-boy, Admiral, is only using her for sexual satisfaction, her avariciousness makes it difficult for her to leave him. She tells us:

I was involved in something I was not ready for, and although it was early enough to change my mind and opt out, I found myself drawn to Admiral like a fly to a gourd of palm wine. I liked him.... I felt tingles go up and down my spine when he put his head on my lap (139).

The question to ask at this juncture is 'must every female character really dabble into a sexual misconduct or sexual merchandising in order to forge ahead in life?' The answer to this should be obvious enough to make contemporary African writers to desist from promoting sexual immorality or glorifying it as the only way out of an economic or emotional quagmire for women. Female sexual autonomy will definitely remain a mirage if it dislocates the structure of another woman's home or condones or encourages the unbridled quest for a sexual freedom which promotes sexual immorality (Azuike 49).

CONCLUSION

This paper posits that women tend to use migration to greener pastures as a means of dabbling into sexual mercantilism. The paper condemns this as an aberrant form of behaviour which should be stopped due to its grave consequences for women. It is concluded in this study that contemporary African feminist writers must stop portraying women as loose and lascivious creatures whose sole ambition in life is to sexually satisfy the men. There are many strong, remarkable, intelligent, competent, highly educated and courageous women on the African continent and in the Diaspora. Such women should be captured in contemporary literary texts for feminism to be respected.

According to sociological criticism, a work of art tends to reveal the nature of society in which it is set. Adichie, Agary and Baingana are revolutionists who have used their writings to protest against sexual mercantilism and women's unreasonableness in marriage. They have also painted women in constant danger and sexual abuse as a way to warn women in general to desist from their migratory missions abroad,

especially for frivolous reasons, because the grass in the Diaspora may not always be greener than the grass at home.

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References to this paper should be made as follows: Maureen Amaka Azuike (2018), Migration, Heterosexuality and Images of Devalued Womanhood in Selected Works of Adichie, Agary and Baingana. *J. of Arts and Contemporary Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Pp. 1-14
