
CULTURAL PATRIARCHY AND MYTHICAL STEREOTYPES ABOUT WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Mythical stereotypes about women in African Literature have undeniably incorporated views which have mostly recognized women in terms of their sexuality and reproduction. Among these stereotypical views exist the continual stressing of the social and political, legal and economic supremacy of the man and the inferior status of the woman. The mythologizing of the woman as the lesser being, therefore, cuts across cultural and geographical boundaries and contemporary African writers have, unfortunately, exacerbated the problem in their works. This study will challenge the cultural, historical, religious and patriarchal boundaries set for women which have inadvertently escalated the breakdown of laws of moral conduct as seen in (selected) contemporary African literary texts. This study will be guided by the New Feminist Approach which is adopted due to its proposal of new ways of helping women to lead better lives as well as its proposal to correct the misconceptions about women. The study will also be guided by the Patriarchal Political Theory which has, to some extent, worsened women's issues. The study will conclude that now is the time, more than ever before, to bust all the mythical stereotypes about women that are propagated by men, which tend to devalue women, and to rewrite contemporary African (feminist) narratives. This is because the archaic cultural values and demeaning roles assigned to

women have had in them, deeply engrained social attitudes that have hindered women's progress for years and have continued to impede their growth.

Keywords: *Cultural Patriarchy, Mythical Stereotypes, Female Sexuality, Feminist Narratives, Contemporary African Literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Hilaire Barnett (2005, p. 29) has opined that mythical stereotypes about women and the inequalities that they continually suffer, 'do not exist in a cultural vacuum.' Barnett also expatiates that inequalities do take different forms in various societies and are dependent on numerous factors which may include cultural, historical, political and legal. Therefore, the mythical stereotyping of women in African literary texts also includes their perception as 'firewood gatherers', 'water collectors', 'bearers of children', 'nurturers of children', 'bed warmers', 'sex facilitators', and 'unpaid home makers'. Women are further perceived as challenging men if they seek any kind of empowerment, especially educational.

The norms of the societies which are portrayed in many contemporary African literary texts are clearly male-oriented. These norms repeatedly dictate that it is absolutely useless, for instance, to educate young girls 'because as soon as they are married they cease to belong to their original families (Azuike, 2004, p. 57). This negative conception about educating young girls is given impetus by the 'acceptable norms' of behaviour or code of conduct for women in many African societies. Women's relegation to the background in African cultural history has immensely contributed to their intellectual backwardness especially as portrayed in African

narratives of the 1950s and 1960s. It is a known fact that African literature is largely historical just as it is political. It reflects the behavioural patterns and conditions of African people, not just their cultures. Therefore, contemporary African writers still treat at length, women's relegation and the unjust discriminatory practices levelled against them since time immemorial. This goes without saying that African women have been marginalized for too long.

Man made laws are passed in traditional and modern African societies whereby culture demands that the women are acquiescent of such laws despite the fact that they are derogatory and downright demeaning to women and also contribute massively to the historical muting and marginalization of women. Cultural patriarchy has historically been a complex problem for African women. The traditional African customs, for instance, tend to encourage polygyny, child marriage, male-child preference and the poverty or the powerlessness of women. It is not news that African narratives have numerously portrayed men who have treated their wives as common slaves or as their inferior and insignificant 'other' because cultural norms permit it. For instance, the African culture permits a man to marry as many wives as 'he can afford' and to cheat on his wife without any feeling of remorse. On the other hand, a woman cannot practice polyandry under any law or cultural circumstance. And if she is found to engage in an illicit affair, her behaviour will be met with grave consequences of which includes, in some customs, severe flogging or stoning to death.

It has also been copiously established by empirical research that religious practices, not just customary ones, have

contributed greatly to women's devaluation and to the mythical stereotypes about women in African literature. Quite frankly, social and customary conventions of the day still persist in making it impossible for African women to enjoy same privileges as men. In many African cultures as shown by Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (2004) for instance, it is forbidden for women to acquire more knowledge than their male counterparts. African narratives have copiously illustrated this fact. The unfortunate realities of many African societies are equally responsible for the outstanding records of ignorant, uneducated girls and young women who cannot perform significant roles to positively impact their lives. They lack the wherewithal and the ability to change their predicament so they contend with their lot. Many are contented with merely performing their stereotypical roles of bearing children and tending domestic animals rather than challenging their educational deprivation. In some African cultures, educating women is perceived as encouraging them to defy men, challenge them or rebel against them. The women who seek to acquire a sound education while others are playing housewives are strongly derided or castigated. Cultural and religious constraints are not the only setbacks observed in African narratives which hinder women from overcoming male oppression, however. Patriarchal boundaries are deliberately set to militate against women's progress. Additionally, female potentialities are repressed in patriarchal societies where men pose as stumbling blocks to women's progress. Thus, this study reiterates that writers of contemporary African literature need to focus more on rewriting their narratives and giving pre-eminence to women who successfully combat the numerous sufferings and the vicarious pains that they

undergo in Africa and the rest of the world. In addition, contemporary African writers need to desist from continuously portraying women as victims in their works instead of painting them as agents of change.

Patriarchal Political Theory has been found by critics to be somewhat problematic as earlier mentioned. For starters, Patriarchal Theory is deemed incapable of offering any explanation for women's oppression and discrimination both in contemporary history and in present times. Patriarchy has also been classified as contributing immensely to the subordination of women both cross-culturally and trans-historically. It is further deemed responsible for women's retrogression in life.

Patriarchy simply means 'ruled by the father.' It is however, more realistically defined as the absolute control of an entire family by a male head. In addition, feminists have associated patriarchy with male domination, male chauvinism, masculine violence and male ideologies in general. It would, indeed, take an ideological struggle of a span of years to overcome patriarchy and completely liberate women from its shackles. This opinion is shared by critics and feminists. Barnett, H (2005, p. 57) further explains that:

Patriarchy is one of the most conceptually and analytically complex theoretical constructs and lies at the heart of traditional jurisprudence and the feminist critique. Not only is the concept difficult, but there exist also differing contemporary interpretations of it. Thus liberal feminists, cultural feminists, radical feminists, Marxist-socialist feminists, black feminists, lesbian feminists all have perceptions regarding

patriarchy which while often overlapping, by no means converge into, a coherent agreed definition.

Furthermore, as a political theory, patriarchalism reflects the view of society as being ruled absolutely by a ruler who is a male and 'to whom all subjects (particularly women) are subservient.' In patriarchal societies, everyone has a role assigned to him or her. However, women's roles are perceived as being more derogatory than men's roles. Filmer (qtd in Barnett, 2005, p. 59) further expatiates that in patriarchal societies, 'men are born into a preordained subject status while women are subjected to their fathers and their husbands for life.'

The Patriarchal Political Theory is also deemed as problematic because a woman in this twenty-first century is:

...governed by the doctrine of 'one flesh', and found herself tied to a husband whose every whim - violent or sexual - could be forced upon her, with no legal rights over her children whatsoever, thus tying her more firmly into a state of dependency in the condition of slavery (Barnett, 2005, p. 61).

Additionally, a patriarchal society bestows upon men, absolute power and priority over women and this contributes to women's marginalization. Patriarchy, in summation, perpetually keeps women in subordination to men in numerous ways.

DISCUSSION

Men and women are crucial to a harmonious society even though the ideology of patriarchy tends to escalate the breakdown of universal laws of moral conduct because of the presumption that upholds the dependence of women on men in all spheres, including sexual matters. Consequently, the women

who populate contemporary African literary texts under study here have degenerated into prostitutes by choice and killers of men by compulsion. The cultural subordination of women does not make matters easier for them. The word subordination, in itself, connotes that something or someone is made less important than the other.

Women's lack of basic needs, adequate financial support and denial of vital access to education in many cultures; hence to decision making, have all contributed to their dogged determination to challenge the men. This has led to their committing murderous crimes in African narratives. In the texts selected for discussion here, women are ironically deemed the 'mutilated sex'. They are oppressed, exploited and sexually abused by men who consider female oppression as part of men's patriarchal benefits. However, this study will reveal how the tables have dangerously turned in the contemporary African literary texts under study. For starters the patriarchal ideologies set out to ridicule and oppress women have ironically created in them, hot headed and ill-tempered women who have squared up to men, challenged and killed them in the works of Amma Darko, Bessie Head, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Adichie, Doreen Baingana, Kaine Agary, Nawal el Saadawi, Mariama Ba, Tsitsi Dangarembga to name just a few. Women are portrayed as violent and fierce, radical feminists, sex predators, prostitutes, drug addicts and compulsive liars.

WOMEN AS KILLER STEREOTYPES

A mythical stereotype is a fixed belief, a received idea or an image that is widely held of a particular person, a category of people or a thing. It may or may not be true, however. Be that

as it may, killers usually blame their grisly crimes on anger while others are motivated to kill by jealousy or greed, or by being sexually compelled to do so. Whatever the reason behind a murder, the one thing that all killers tend to have in common is the act of killing another human being. In contemporary African writings, authors have unleashed extremely radical, feminist protagonists who in their protest against sexism and stringent patriarchal power structure have resorted to killing men; especially as the only means of attaining freedom from them. This is rather unfortunate. Women as killer stereotypes are images created of women who, in the texts under study, have cut off the sexual organs of the men in their lives or have poisoned them to death. Worse still, the murders committed by the category of aforementioned women are made to overshadow the realities of the threats posed by their male victims in each of the selected texts. In the selected texts also, contemporary writers have variously labelled all aggrieved women as prostitutes and the married ones as killers whose male victims are portrayed as psychopaths, rapists, violent abusers of women and extortionists.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Dikeledi, for instance, loses it in a dysfunctional marriage in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1982) and cuts off her husband's genitals, leaving him to bleed out. Similarly in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), an abused housewife tires of her marriage and poisons her husband to death. What is more worrisome is that neither of the two murders is committed with remorse. A wardress tells Dikeledi when she is incarcerated in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1982, p.88):

'So you have killed your husband, have you? You'll be in good company. We have four other women here for the same crime. It's becoming the fashion these days.'

Dikeledi, in turn, proudly shares her experience of murder with Kebonye, another inmate who has also killed her husband:

'I cut off all his special parts with a knife (p. 89),' she boasts.

Kebonye simply responds:

'I did it with a razor (p. 89).'

Both accounts are chilling experiences. The remorseless women in question also blame their actions on the suffering inflicted on them by the husbands they have killed.

In Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2010), what is encountered is a complete erosion of moral values when a young woman is passed from one lewd man to another until she becomes a certified sexual slave and then a killer. Later on in the narrative, she is described as killing her pimp in the following gruesome manner:

I continued to look straight at him without blinking. I knew I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master.... I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. The whites of his eyes went red. His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly (p. 104).

The grisly crime committed above in *Woman at Point Zero* is blamed on the pimp's abusive nature and continuous financial exploitation of Firdaus, the female protagonist of the text.

In *So Long a Letter* (1989) Mariama Ba, the late Senegalese writer and feminist, kills off a man in her famous narrative for morally and materially abandoning his wife of over twenty-five years. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist of Ba's text goes through a lot of emotional and psychological torture when her husband abandons her and her children in order to secretly take a teenage wife. Ba, in this narrative, wields the dreaded female power which deliberately kills Modou in order to liberate his frustrated wife, Ramatoulaye. The death of Modou brings the novelette to a horrific climax of events for Ramatoulaye and drastically changes her life.

In Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1997), Zhizha's father subjects his own daughter to a series of incestuous relationships with him. This costs the girl her virginity and causes Runyararo, the mother, to kill her husband who is incidentally Zhizha's father. Runyararo commits this murder believing it to silence her husband forever and free her daughter from his sexual molestation.

WOMEN AS PROSTITUTE STEREOTYPES

In Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish* (2008) and in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) sexual purity is virtually extinct! The protagonists of the aforementioned texts and their friends all throw caution to the wind and partake in a series of sexual escapades and sexual orgies which turn out deadly for some and cause others to abort unplanned pregnancies. In Baingana's *Tropical Fish* can be seen a catastrophic and

scandalous decline of moral values as a group of school girls confess to being sexual slaves for the sole purpose of pleasing the men. They love the experience as Baingana tells us in the text. It is only at the point of death from HIV and AIDS that one of them confesses in sadness and in deep fear of the ravaging disease:

'I am going to die soon.'

'I'm dying because ... we overdid it, trying to pass the point of need, to exhaust desire.... (Baingana, 2008, p. 76).'

The female character Rosa, whose confession is shown above, only feels a tinge of remorse because she is dying. She is among the young girls who believe in the text that their 'sexual freedom' will always reward them with immense gifts. For years she and the other girls have siphoned money and material things from their sexual partners and clients. Instead, sexual autonomy brings them the dreaded HIV and AIDS and 'a slow, painful death in Baingana's *Tropical Fish* (p. 76).'

Olanna is another female character who also sleeps with her sister's boyfriend, Richard, in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007). She does so with lascivious and evil intentions. Adichie reveals how the extremely intelligent Olanna deliberately seduces and engages in sexual intercourse with her sister's boyfriend, Richard, in order to get even with her cheating husband, Odenigbo. Odenigbo had had canal knowledge of a minor who incidentally was a maid. One is so disgusted at this juncture with the stereotypical views of women painted here that one wonders why the works of contemporary African writers are so replete with sexual misconduct and lascivious lifestyles and gruesome murders. All of the aforementioned

crimes are said to be committed by women who are in search of emancipation from male oppression.

Again in Nawal El Saadawi's book, the writer centres her narrative mostly on women's sexuality and legal status. In *Woman at Point Zero* (2010), for instance, Firdaus finds herself in the prostitution business even though she is intellectually sound, physically well endowed and reasonably well educated. While in the business, she kills Mazouk her pimp, as earlier mentioned because he physically abuses her and regularly extorts money from her. For what is considered an abominable crime in her society, she is hanged. Firdaus narrates her impending death at the novelette's denouement with as much gusto as she does in narrating the killing of Mazouk:

They put steel handcuffs around my wrists, and led me off to prison. In prison they kept me in a room where the windows and the doors were always shut; I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality. They condemned me to death not because I had killed a man ... but because they are afraid to let me live. They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life.... I fear nothing. Therefore I am free (p. 110)

REWRITING AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Contemporary African writers ought to understand that a people's lifestyle is a leeway to their cultural heritage. Contemporary literature, therefore, must reflect more of the positivity that is needed to curb the world of the numerous

atrocities that plague it. Contemporary African literature, in this century should also celebrate women's intelligence and numerous contributions to nation building. Unfortunately, most contemporary African narratives continually present women as being morally lax even when men readily seduce them or lewdly lure them to bed as evident in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010). Otherwise, women are portrayed as killers even when some murders are committed in self defence as seen in Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (2010) and in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). Monday Zakka (2016, p. 2-3) opines that:

African writers have a duty to project the reality of their society and also to create a desired future. This is contrary to the position of ... Western writers who focus on what is negative, inflate ... situations and deliberately refuse to see the positive aspects of African life.

According to Zakka's opinion cited above, contemporary African writers are more profoundly guilty of 'refusing to see the positive aspects of the lives of their female protagonists than the Western writers.' It is high time that African writers helped to salvage the mangled image of Africa and its people and particularly restored the dignity of African womanhood as proposed by Zakka. Furthermore, female sexual autonomy which gives people the impetus to engage in moral misdemeanours as observed by Azuike (2015, p. 49) will definitely remain a mirage if it is such that dislocates or destroys lives and condones sexual mercantilism in people.

By constantly capturing sexual immorality and the killing of men by women as the only way for women to forge ahead, contemporary African writers have dislocated family structures and terribly mutilated the female psyche amongst others. Furthermore, contemporary writers are guilty of encouraging lascivious lifestyles and grisly crimes which in turn have led our current generation to self-destruct. There are a good number of women and role models in Africa and the world whose success stories need to be told in order to replace the perverted images of women in contemporary African narratives.

Furthermore, women's use of sexuality for mercantilism is an aberrant form of behaviour (Azuike 2015) and should be discouraged in contemporary narrative texts. Instead, women's involvement in development and in cultural renaissance should be the focus of intensive debates in this 21st century. Otherwise, women will continue to 'slide into the obscurity of development process' as Kongolo, M (2009, p. 13) has rightly observed. Kongolo also opines that:

Investigating women's participation in development is crucial for they are the backbone of rural economy, notwithstanding the discrimination levelled against them (24).

New Feminists, like cultural feminists, have demanded an end to the devaluation of women by working towards a transformation of society that will accord respect and honour to women. The first step towards achieving the aforementioned is by positively representing women in African narratives as they have suggested. New Feminism is among the newest brands of feminism and it seeks a practical

solution, according to Azuike (2015, p. 15) to the ideological quagmire in which the 1960s feminism has found itself enmeshed

The practitioners of New Feminism have particularly proposed new ways of helping women to find fulfilment in their lives. These new ways which include the correcting of women's battered images and the rewriting of stereotypical views of women in African narratives are recommended for adoption in our current era where women are encouraged to 'balance up for better.' It is, indeed, the duty of female writers to correct the misconceptions peddled against women and to rewrite the long standing stereotypes propagated by male writers.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it can be surmised that African female writers' presentation of the issues concerning women needs an urgent reshaping. As stipulated in our discussion, there is need for a rewriting of African narratives that encourages women to bulldoze through stereotypical norms and boldly demand for their rights to better treatment. Contemporary writers need to speak positively on behalf of women in their works, especially by correcting the stereotypical misconceptions propagated against them by men. These misconceptions tend to have in them, deeply engrained social attitudes that have negatively affected women for years and have caused some women to run amok in their acts of defiance. In addition, the stereotypical portrayal of women as deadly schemers, sexual predators, objects of pleasure and excessively talkative people amongst others should give way to new perspectives which portray them as intelligent and

resourceful people who have contributed positively to nation building. In line with the New Feminist ideology which proposes a transformation of our society, contemporary African writers should use their narratives to bust all mythical stereotypes and end the global devaluation of women which patriarchy has historically promoted. Women should seek better ways of liberation and empowerment that do not include committing murderous crimes and resorting to wayward lifestyles.

Finally, the breaking of all mythical stereotypes which are linked to women's devaluation and discrimination should be the greatest solution to women's problems in patriarchal societies. This message must be preached in contemporary fictive texts. With the rewriting or reshaping of African narratives, many young girls and women in Africa and beyond will realise that they can thrive in any environment or geographical location in which they find themselves. Otherwise, the persistence of writers on apportioning stereotypical roles to women in their texts will never change the myth that women are victims and can never be agents of change in a world dominated by men.

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