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THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MARIAMA BA'S SO LONG A LETTER, AKACHI ADIMORA'S THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES, AND ONYEKACHI PETER ONUOHA'S MOONLIGHT LADY

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representation of women in selected works of Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*, Akachi Adimora's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Onyekachi Peter Onuoha's *Moonlight Lady*. African literature was in the past seen as men's preserve. The purpose of this study is to critical look at how African women reject patriarchal and traditional norms which they are confined to and take charge of their lives. This is a qualitative research as information are gathered from unpublished works, text books, internet, and other sources. The theory that informs this study is the African feminist theory known as womanism, an offshoot of feminism. Finding shows that patriarchy, obnoxious cultural norms and traditions are the major setbacks that mount restrictions on the personality of women in African society. This study recommends that the female gender should be schooled and educated on the importance of self-development and self worth. This study concludes that African writers have taken it upon themselves, through their efforts and struggles to projects a new realism and vision for Africa, while redressing the presentation of the Africa woman. This paper contributes to knowledge as it has exposed to readers that Women are beginning to emerge from behind, the veil of male-based culture to voice their needs.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in early African society, as reflected in the literary works of African male writers, is connected with the patriarchal nature of traditional African society. In most African societies, women are seen but not heard. They are restricted and relegated to the background of societal activities, such as domestic chores and subsistent farming; hence, their feelings and contributions to civilization are not felt. Women in Africa, for a long time

have been conditioned by culture, tradition, and philosophy of dominant religions. African society is principally regarded as a men's society, and it essentially upholds the superiority of the man over the woman. Significantly, the presentation of the African woman in early African literature is not a positive one, as the early African written literature was dominated by men. This negative representation is seen to a considerable extent in the works of male writers like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and numerous others.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents the uneducated traditional African women using Okonkwo's wives. The representation of Okonkwo's wives is that of docile women whose identities are recognized through their husbands, children, and motherhood. This is the reason Okonkwo takes it hard on the women at the slightest provocation. The assertion of Charles Nnolim regarding women comes to mind when he states thus, "The reason the African woman will continue to bemoan their fate is that they believe mainly in marriage as one of the highways of self- realization and fulfillment" (162). The experiences of women historically have always been shaped by gender bias. In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, Waringa is dismissed from her job because she refuses to sleep with her boss. She was deflowered and impregnated by Mr. Gitahi, who insulted and blamed her for letting herself loose. She was neglected, and the pregnancy resulted in a baby girl. In Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, women were captured and taken into slavery as sex objects when the allied forces of Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife besieged the people of Owu.

Low self esteem is seen in the delineation of women in African literature because of the existence of patriarchy. In the light of the above, African female writers have continued to use literature to conscientize the masses on the ideals of womanhood and to challenge and correct practices, whether politically, economically, or socially, as such vices infringe on the rights and recognition of African women in African society, based on any literary contribution that tends to relegate the value and potential of women. Male-authored literary works need to be analyzed as a basis for examining the literary responses to the presentation of women in some African male-authored works. It is found that women are often presented as appendages of men. If the African woman is assertive, she is seen as stubborn and deviant. She is placed at the lower ebb of the social strata: always presented as being satisfied with joyful motherhood and a personality with low self-esteem. She is, as a result of these negative representations, discriminated against and denied certain rights in society.

Literature Review

Through Achebe's portrayal of women, the perception of the society in African literature is one in which a father trains the male children to grow up to become men, fearless and audacious, and the females to be soft, submissive, frail, and weak. No wonder Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* declared, "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan" (29). Okonkwo is of the belief that Nwoye is too lazy and should man up in both character and behaviour. According to him, "I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is much of his mother in him" (66). Okonkwo viewed Nwoye as effeminate and believed that he did not meet the traditional Igbo standards of masculinity, which deeply disappointed and angered him.

The inferiority of women as perceived by traditional African societies in African literature has become a preponderant issue militating against the recognition of the value of women. This is particularly so in most early novels written by men, which fall short of representing the concept of the male-conceived negative image of the woman as a non-accommodated element of the universe. Writers like Ekwensi, Ngugi, and Achebe, in their early literary works, portray African women as second-class citizens, subservient, harlots, or even appendages to men. Commenting on the supposed image of African women in African literature, Catherine Acholonu emphasizes that:

The woman in African literature has no identity of her own, as her biology is seen as the basis of her existence and is a pawn in the hands of fathers and husbands. Men make harlot of their daughters or sell them off to the highest bidder in order to enrich themselves (15).

The representation of the woman as a male appendage is obsolete. The African society has designed and patterned the expected behaviour of the African woman in a patriarchal society in terms of role playing. A woman's life should not be centred only on the family space, as there are several opportunities opened to her to be fulfilled in society. The female in the hands of the male writers is projected as an object of subjugation, scorn, degradation, disgrace, physical torture, and even sometimes death. This assertion is indeed true because most of African literature written by male authors relegate the female characters to the background. These male writers brutally portray an unsatisfactory picture of African women in African literature. The female characters in some of the early African novels are usually presented as slaves to the men, abused, despised, and usually created with one fault or the other. Instead of appreciating the value of the imagined feminine weakness, most male writers have a debasing image of African women in African literature. Writers like Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Onuora Nzekwe, Ngugi Wa' Thiong'o, and others, too numerous to mention, have followed in

this direction of negative presentation of women in their works. Their female characters are constantly created to be subjugated, scorned, degraded, and relegated to the background. This is why the major interest of feminist critics has been to reconstruct the ways women are presented in literature, correct the female representation, their concerns and values in fictional works as well as in real society.

Significantly, African literature, especially after independence, has grown enormously, and feminism has contributed and will continue to contribute to the growth. Through the channels created by contemporary African female writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Akachi Ezeigbo, Zynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Gracy Osifo, etc., the image of African women will continue to be lifted in African literature. Sindiwe Magona challenges this silencing and misrepresentation in her appeal to other Black women. According to her;

My beloved sisters, our men have not loved us enough; they have not respected us enough to make equal partners. Thus, we have no voice in the new millennium; let us wait no more for their benevolence. It does not exist (21).

This assertion encouraged the female writers to correct the misconceptions and rewrite the stereotypes propagated by male writers to give a genuine woman's point of view. Women need to stop talking about silencing and do something about it, and female writers have been doing just that in a powerful way. Women are simply no longer reacting but are also taking action. They empower female characters to fight back. They are ripping off the duct tape that has covered their mouths for a long time, a chauvinistic change and revolution that has come to stay. African women's writing explores a cultural life for women not choked by traditional customs only but laced with women's struggle for economic empowerment and social freedom. These writers are focused on the ideology of the woman as the heart of their novels. They depict the practical realities of women's lives in Africa as their works address simultaneously the need for African women to break the chain of patriarchy and cultural inhibition and its stigma as they (women) rethink their involvement in an oppressive and marginalised society.

Feminist writers are influenced by the thought pattern formulated by society. The objective of the writers is to reflect women's experiences and their sufferings. This field of literature has become the path to eradicating the injustices done to women by men. These writers have attempted to reject the image of the confined women in order to expand her space both literally and otherwise. These writers have attempted to break the social norms in which women are trapped.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is African Feminism. Feminism is all about women's fight against subjugation, marginalisation, and subordination by patriarchal society. It is women's clamouring for their freedom as humans. The entrance of female writers into the literary scene promoted the launch of feminism as an ideological weapon to free women from enslavement occasioned by biological and cultural realities. The feminist struggle has been traced to 1792, to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, "The Vindication of the Rights of Women.". It is against the backdrop of the French Revolution and the anti-slavery movement.

African feminism is formed to tackle African women's peculiarities, problems, and the excesses of some sociocultural intuitions. African feminism strives to achieve gender equality, not to override men. The principle is the practice of non-violence in order to achieve a non-violent society. African feminism advocates for a world where differences are not detested but appreciated, celebrated, and understood. African feminism advocates and argues for women's emancipation in Africa. They are not interested in dismantling female order. They seek balance, mutual respect, and harmony between men and women. They seek to acknowledge every woman's experience, irrespective of how irrelevant or minor that experience might be, and this, to a large extent, is in line with the aim and objective of African feminism.

Catherine Acholonu affirms:

African feminist criticism is the mode of literary criticism that approaches a text with primary concern for the female experience in it, the fictional experience of the characters, or the deductible or imaginable experience of the African female writer or character in the text as a yard stick for measuring the experience of the African woman in the society (94).

Therefore, it would not be out of place to state that women in Africa have different experiences, culturally, socially, and otherwise. They want a meaningful union between women and men. They want to strike a balance. They want to be treated fairly in any environment where they find themselves, irrespective of culture, tradition, and other social constraints. African feminism acknowledges that African women have preferences necessitated by education, race, culture, age, marriage, and so on, which determine their experiences, choices, and reactions to happenings around them. Feminism has pointed out that the problem is that the entire global economy needs drastic change. Cultural and ideological recognition of women's worth and the worth of their work is also necessary.

The Representation of Women in Mariama

Ba's *So Long a Letter*

The negative portrayal of women in African society is also challenged in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Taking the social and political context from which Ba wrote into consideration, it is not difficult to identify the parallels that exist between her and Ramatoulaye. Ba married a Senegalese member of parliament, Obeye Diop, but divorced him and was left to care for their nine children, a similar fate that befalls the protagonist of her novel, Ramatoulaye.

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is a beautiful recreation of the pains, deprivation, and betrayal of a wise, progressive, devoted, and resourceful mother of many children, Ramatoulaye, who is abandoned by her husband of twenty-five years, in his quest for a second marriage to a classmate of her daughter. Akachi Ezeigbo opines that *So Long A Letter* has been written specifically to:

Expose the cultural traditions that marginalize and oppress women in Senegal. Using Ramatoulaye as her voice, Ba criticizes the situation where patriarchy and tradition continue to slow down women's development, even in post independence Senegal (15).

It is a letter written by Ramatoulaye to a bosom friend, Aissatou, that recounts the sad details of her unsuccessful marriage to Modou Fall and her subsequent attempt to survive as a single parent. The entire novel is a self-stripping exercise undertaken by Ramatoulaye. It is Ramatoulaye's reply to a letter from Aissatou, a close friend and childhood companion of hers, exposing the agonies, fears, desires, deprivations, and humiliation of an intelligent, progressive, ideal, modern, and educated but betrayed woman who spent a greater part of her life as a doting wife of an ungrateful man, Modou Fall. Ramatoulaye's husband abandons her and her twelve children to savour the charms and beauty of a young classmate of his daughter, Binetou. The novel is Ramatoulaye's diary of reminiscences of her life before and after her abandonment, which she shares with a friend in a period of psychological trauma, for as she says, "confiding in others allays pains" (I).

The Moslem society of Senegal is one that is patriarchal in nature. The nature of patriarchy in Ramatoulay's society "is one that subjects widows to various oppressive traditions, in Moslem observance of customs, which are not adhered to by the men. According to Ramatoulaye, the death of a husband is a "moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman." (4) During this period, the wife gives up her possession. Her worth is known after the death of her husband as she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law, and worse still, she gives up her personality; her dignity becomes a thing in the service of the man who married her. This is the fate of the African women of Senegal. The African woman as portrayed in Ba's

So Long A Letter is not just an entity relegated to the background but one whose life is enveloped with obligation to the man (husband).

Mariama Ba made a painstaking effort in creating her female characters in order to expose the true problem of the Senegalese women and,, by extension, the African women. She therefore creates Ramatoulaye to be a typical Senegalese woman, indoctrinated into the Muslim faith; an exact epitome of a Muslim, African woman. She is consistent in the role she plays as a suppressed woman, a woman restricted by traditional as well as religious practices. Through her and other characters like Aissatou, the trauma, pain,, and dehumanization associated with polygamy are exposed. As a faithful wife to Modou Fall, she plays her role in the home as a faithful mother. She is ultimately a mother of twelve, hence her pivotal obligation to the husband. She nurses their children, typical of an African woman, to become significant in life. Again, she is noted by neighbours for her industrious nature, which endears her to the husband and the family at large, aside from her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, who do not feel happy with her marriage to Modou Fall. Ramatoulaye, however endures, having come in terms with the restrictions of custom and the demeanor of the mother-in-law and sisters- in-law towards her.

The exaltation of Ba's *So Long A Letters* significantly in her character creation, which is indeed remarkable. Ramatoulaye, despite the restrictions of custom, religion, and tradition, still endured, and Ba did not fail in the expression of the basis for her endurance, hence making for believability in characterization in her novel. Even in the creation of Modou as a character who initially was portrayed as a good, kind, loving husband, Ba essentially provides a basis for his change; a change from fidelity to infidelity, love and care towards his wife, to desertion and seclusion.

By providing a basis for this change, Ba succeeds in her character delineation, as a character cannot necessarily change without reason(s) for such a change. Significantly, therefore, good or adequate characterization in any work of art cannot be achieved without consistency in a character's disposition and temperament, believability in the roles they play, plausibility, and realism. Ba essentially fulfills these criteria in her character creation because through these characters we appreciate the plight of the African women and their place in African society. Her female characters are imbued with the capability and capacity to contribute to the development of their individual families. But Aissatou, who is characterized as a radical feminist, views such a move as a betrayal.

The Positive Portrayal of African Women in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*

Ezeigbo's The Last of the Strong Ones becomes instrumental in her agenda of portraying the positive representation of women in traditional African society, reaffirming the existence of feminism in African literature. The women's liberation movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies gave a new impetus to feminist politics. This liberation is the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities in society as men. A society that believes in the superiority of men over women. This is seen when Umuga nominated four women, Onyekozuru, Chieme, Ejimnaka, and Chibuka, to be members of Oluada and representatives of women in the Obuofe Community. The female characters in this work have come of age through their roles as presented to the readers. They are nominated because they are bold, courageous, hard-working, and fearless. Despite all these qualities, they are allowed to merely contribute to the matters affecting the community, while the men take the final decision.

Ezeigbo demonstrates that women's resistance to various types of marginalization, subjugation, and oppression in the novel is a result of dissatisfaction with how men are treating them. Onyekozuru, Ejimnaka, Chieme, and Chibuka fought hard to liberate themselves and gain independence from the claws of patriarchy. They stood their ground, worked hard, and achieved their goals. Accordingly, part of Ezeigbo's objectives is to portray major female characters who suffered subjugation and how they fought to regain their freedom and rebuild their identities.

In effect, Ezeigbo creates powerful, dynamic female characters who are bold, courageous, and fearless when faced with problems. This is quite unlike the case before in most male-authored texts, where women play second fiddle and insignificant roles, for instance, the female characters in Isidore Okpe's *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*, to mention but a few. Ezeigbo, in her image-rebuilding agenda, reveals another side of women that has often been neglected, submerged, and unexplored in African literary writings. The women the reader encounters in *The Last of the Strong Ones* are courageous, bold, assertive, and independent, and they need no one to speak for them or fight for them despite their limitations and challenges as women in a traditional cultural setting. To reveal these women's identities and personalities, the study examines some of the significant decisions and actions taken by these women. Onyekozuru, Ejimnaka, Chieme, and Chibuka are courageous women, masters of their lives, and in control of their decisions. They know what they want and refuse to compromise on their values and principles despite the odds and challenges against them.

Ezeigbo reveals through her female characters that women's self-reclamation, self-actualization, and identity rebuilding are individual races and battles that each woman who desires liberation from unwarranted oppression must strategize by herself to accomplish. Additionally, the study underscores that the women in *The Last of the Strong Ones*, viewed through the lens of African feminism, show that their experiences and personalities are insightful in understanding the identities and challenges of African women and their native culture. Thus, they are independent, vocal, innovative, resourceful, adventurous, accommodating, and unpretentious for their gender. They refuse to incline themselves to any identity imposed on them by the society they inhabit and instead define whom they want to be by making choices and decisions that they consider favourable to their lives and personal developments. Ezeigbo's aim of deconstructing and reconstructing the presentation of women by giving them new identities that suit their social and cultural transformation in Nigeria is remarkable.

Culture does not make a people; people make culture, and culture thrives when it best serves and reflects a people. African culture must become one that celebrates achievements, whether they come from men or women. Ezeigbo's female characters change their stance as they reclaim themselves after discovering that they are the only architects of their fate and success. They accept that they are not in competition or fighting with anyone. They reject accommodations that go contrary to their beliefs and happiness. The various characters explored with their diverse experiences showcase experiences of oppression by women in some African nations. These experiences and actions differ in various ways through their environment, age, class, gender preferences, and cultural expectations of them. Thus, each of these factors is interconnected and on multiple levels, which heightened the challenges these women face in Nigeria. Some women emerged stronger through these experiences and helped impress positive attitudes on other women. Women are raised differently and aspire differently, and their various experiences cannot be categorized as universal or overlooked as insignificant in rhetoric regarding women's identities and experiences of oppression, especially in the traditional African environment.

The Representation of Women Onuoha's *The Moonlight Lady*

This work illustrates the capacity of the woman to be good, better, courageous, focused, and determined. This is a work of prose fiction. The author's feminist literary attempts are enriched with composite ideological positions, and his intended meaning is always very lucid, for the

dominant hierarchy upon which the order of existence is predetermined has placed the man at the centre of creation, which is also substantiated by cultural norms that prioritize generic divides. The principle of feminism has been created to alter patriarchal hegemony in order to reconstruct the distorted female self of an egalitarian society. *Moonlight Lady* expresses the awakening of women's self-consciousness, liberation, quest for survival, and freedom from patriarchal suppression. Women's subordination and relegation to the background have been long-term ideologies coupled with African culture and tradition.

We see in the 'moonlight lady' Ikukuoma's father, telling the wife that training Ikukuoma in school is a waste of money, for her place is in the kitchen and she belongs to another man. Mr. Chima says, "Who do you want to assist you? Are you not a woman? Have you forgotten that the place of the woman is in the kitchen? Now get inside the kitchen and continue your work, efulefu"(10).

Ikukuoma's quest for education and desire for academic advancement showcase her determination to fulfill her dreams, achieve her goals, and conquer the world without letting anything deter or hinder her ambition. The book showcases the effects of patriarchy, and cultural challenges in women's fight for freedom and self-actualization. Ikukuoma defies the bounds of the patriarchal society and carves out a niche for herself in a male-dominated world. The narrative is structured around Ikukuoma's life, beginning with her early years in a family where the father subjugates and relegates her to the background for the singular fact that she is a girl. Her upbringing was unconventional and fraught with challenges, including insults, emotional abuse, and outbursts.

Similarities in the Selected Texts

These three texts show female characters who rebel in one way or another against African traditional roles and societal expectations. Aissatou, in *So Long a Letter*; Ikukuoma in *Moonlight Lady*; and Onyekaozoro, Chieme, Ejimnaka, and Chibuoka in *The Last of the Strong Ones* all struggle against oppressive patriarchal norms and assert their rights. These writers explores the representation of women in African society and portrays a positive and modest perception of women.

CONCLUSION

This paper calls for a proper representation of the role of women in society. This is necessary for the purpose of growth and sustainable societal development. Women who were marginalized and trampled upon emerge as strong, assertive bearers, who reshape and rewrite

their histories. Women have taken active roles in redirecting their lives in order to effect a positive image of them through every necessary channel.

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